

REPORT: AFTER KATRINA,
REDEMPTION & REBUILDING

ALICE WATERS COOKS
UP A D.C. REVOLUTION

HOW UNIONS ORGANIZE
EVERYTHING BUT WORKERS

THE AMERICAN PROSPECT

LIBERAL INTELLIGENCE

Post-Racial. Really?

*The NAACP navigates
the new politics of race*

NAACP
President
Ben Jealous



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Americans may eventually find a way to live without oil.
Water is another story.

Optimistic Americans believe we will eventually replace our dependence on oil with alternative fuels. There is no alternative for water. It is the one resource that humans can't live without for more than a few days. Yet many experts see water shortages as a looming crisis of massive proportions. Evidence abounds. Robert M. Hirsch of the U.S. Geological Survey reports some parts of the country are now depleting water that has been around since the ice age. California water officials say population growth is outrunning water supply and that the state will be short on water by 2020. Every newcomer to California adds 140 gallons of water demand per day. El Paso, San Antonio and Albuquerque could run out of water by 2020. Central Florida could run out of water in five years. In Kansas, the high plains aquifer will be used up within twenty-five years. And upstate New York's reservoirs are at record lows. A water shortage will make an oil shortage seem trivial. What can we do to head off a water crisis? The first step is limiting waste, especially in irrigation. The second is limiting demand by managing a population explosion driven almost totally by immigration. If we can all agree on an immigration plan that is fair and workable, we can avoid the projected growth of another 100 million people in just 30 years*. If we don't, the demand for fresh, clean water will continue unabated. Until the tap runs dry.

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VOLUME 20 • NUMBER 2 MARCH 2009

"The difficulty lies, not in the
new ideas, but in escaping from
the old ones."
—JOHN MAYNARD KEYNES, THE
GENERAL THEORY OF EMPLOYMENT,
INTEREST, AND MONEY

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TAP ONLINE

- 🔗 This month at **www.prospect.org**, **Gershon Gorenberg** reports from the Middle East, **Courtney E. Martin** explores questions of activism, and **Ezra Klein** weighs in on the political zeitgeist.

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Cover art by John Ritter

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PROSPECTS

Breaking the Grip of the Past

THE AMERICAN POLITICAL SYSTEM, WITH ITS “STATUS quo bias” (as political scientists call it), is not set up for moments like this when the economy is sinking fast and the country requires strong action that breaks with previous policy. After the election, many people concluded

that conservatism was over and done with, and at least in one sense, that’s true. No credible response to the crisis has come from the right. But if conservatism seems dead, it isn’t nearly as dead as it should be. As the battle over the stimulus package indicated, the right can still exploit the many “veto points” in the system (such as the need for 60 votes to pass legislation in the Senate) to delay, water down, and obstruct the kind of coherent and capable action we need.

For Barack Obama and the Democrats, the problem is not just the hard-right conservatives who dominate the Republican Party and the right-wing media echo chamber. Given the urgency of present circumstances, the critical impediment may lie in the ambivalent center—among the middle-of-the-road Democrats and Republicans who hold the margin of votes in the Senate, much of the business and opinion-leader establishment, and a large part of the public who are not strongly affiliated with any party or ideological position.

Winning over those groups poses the key challenge if Congress and the new administration are to free the country from the dead right hand of the past. Obama’s mix of conciliatory and assertive stances—an openness to talking with the other side and a willingness to concede, in principle, that it may have a point, yet a determination when pressed to fight for his policies—is not just an expression of his personality. It’s the rational strategy

of a politician who can’t get his program through unless he peels off some part of the opposition.

During his campaign and now as president, Obama has tended not to confront conservatism in general terms, and that disinclination may also make political sense, up to a point. Many Americans who identify themselves as conservative nonetheless favor liberal positions on specific policies. In his 2004 book, *Tides of Consent*, the political scientist James A. Stimson estimated that about 22 percent of the public fall into this mixed category—symbolically conservative, yet operationally liberal. Since the election, while some surveys have shown more Americans continuing to identify as conservative than as liberal, the polls have also recorded large majorities supporting Obama’s program, which suggests a big increase in that symbolically conservative, operationally liberal segment of the public.

Much of Obama’s rhetoric seems geared to appeal to this group. For example, his Inaugural Address, with its invocation of responsibility and other traditional virtues, along with clear signals of government activism, embodied that symbolically conservative, operationally liberal mix. Often Obama seems

to distance himself from any ideological position, insisting that he just favors what works and that if Democrats and Republicans would only put aside their ostensibly petty arguments, they could agree on solutions. That post-partisan stance doesn’t seem terribly realistic, but it’s a way of appealing to the deep American strain of anti-partisanship and keeping focused on the concrete steps Obama wants to take.

But reflexive, conservative ideology—support for tax cuts, no matter the facts and circumstances; a preference for policies that favor the well-off; a bias against the use of public institutions and public regulation—remains a powerful factor in national debate. So it’s crucial, perhaps more for others than for Obama, to continue to press the case that our present problems have ideological roots—that they are not due equally to all sides but rather to the mistaken premises, malignant neglect, and sometimes outright malfeasance of a long era of conservative government.

In his first press conference on Feb. 9, Obama repeatedly emphasized his efforts to include Republicans, but he added that if conservatives just wanted more tax cuts for the well off or for government to do nothing, “we’re not going to make much progress.” Deftly done, this stance, which is becoming Obama’s signature, could gradually educate the public about the folly of conservative views and help move the country toward a new progressive center. But if he concedes too much, it could be another version of disabling triangulation.

We need new policies, but we also need a new public philosophy to make sense of those policies. If, as Rahm Emmanuel has told us, a crisis is a terrible thing to waste, it would be a waste if this crisis didn’t serve to draw some lessons about the principles that a decent and prosperous society requires. **TAP**

— PAUL STARR

Conservatism may seem dead, but it isn’t nearly as dead as it should be.



NO NEW DEAL NICETIES

University of Minnesota economics professor **HARLAN SMITH** digested, applauded, and then rebutted parts of **HAROLD MEYERSON**'s cover story, "A Global New Deal": "I was initially impressed by Meyerson's logical argument that as business became national, certain other things had to become national rather than purely local. Now with business being global, the things he mentions would need to become global also. The nature of globalization and the structure of the World Trade Organization will be important in judging [Meyerson's] propositions. At present, transnational corporations do as they wish to maximize their own profits, whatever effects there may be on other interests. This needs to be changed so that all nations have a chance to advance their own interests." Smith differs from Meyerson on how to get there—he rejects the goal of internationally recognized standards for trade, labor, and consumer protection and suggests the U.S. more strictly regulate its own dealings.

THINKING BIGGER

JIM CARPENTER, an economics instructor at Milwaukee Area Technical College, wrote in to tack on four more ideas

to **ROBERT KUTTNER**'s piece, "Obama's Economic Opportunity." He wrote, "Taxing the wealthy could actually stimulate the economy if the source of the tax payments is idle cash that will be put into circulation by government spending." He moved on to collective consumption: "More attention needs to be placed on rebooting employment rather than increasing consumer spending. People will have to reduce their needless consumption if we want to tackle this problem. The only way to achieve full employment when highly productive workers decide to live more simply and consume less is to share the work." He then addressed joblessness, eyeing pre-recession dynamics: "It is time to create a safety net of publicly funded jobs for individuals who have no income and want to work. In Milwaukee, where I live, there were enormous levels of joblessness even before this latest crisis. Simply rebooting aggregate demand is not going to create job opportunities for everyone needing work." And finally, he urged that we "increase, and not forget" spending in developing nations.

In February, the ideas outlined in Kuttner's feature were discussed at length at "Thinking Big, Thinking Forward: A Conference on America's Economic Future," sponsored by *TAP*, *Demos*, the Economic Policy Institute, and the Campaign for America's Future. Nobel Prize-winning economist **PAUL KRUGMAN** gave the keynote address, and **GOV. ED RENDELL** of Pennsylvania and **CONGRESSMAN GEORGE MILLER** of California were among

the leaders and experts who attended to engage the question of how to rebuild a new and more sustainable economy out of the current crisis.

KUDOS

Reader **DAVID BLATT** e-mailed us to say "the magazine and the Web site are consistently excellent. In particular, **MARK SCHMITT**'s articles over the past year have, time after time, provided the most incisive analysis of the presidential campaign and of Barack Obama's unique and transformative style of politics.

Thanks for being the best place to go for progressive takes on key policy issues."

Correction: Our piece "How Bush Broke the Government" was written and reported by several contributors. We regret that Emily Douglas was left off of that list.

Write to us at letters@prospect.org or to The Editors, The American Prospect, 1710 Rhode Island Ave., NW, 12th Floor, Washington, D.C. 20036. Or join the conversation online at www.prospect.org

FROM THE EXECUTIVE EDITOR

AT THIS WRITING, JUST A FEW WEEKS INTO OBAMA'S presidency, a truly progressive governing majority is getting to work. Amid profound crises at home and abroad, the new president and Congress can't do it alone—they need the support, criticism, and independent pressure of progressive social-change organizations.

The NAACP is among the oldest of such organizations, and confronted with facile proclamations of a "post-racial" society, it faces the challenge of defining a mission suitable to the situation of black America today. Its young new president, Benjamin Jealous, is an Obama-like figure but one who passed up politics for activism. Our writing fellow Adam Serwer sheds a light on the state of racial politics and activism in this new day.

Organized labor is another venerable anchor of progressive politics, but it has been stalled by the inability to form unions in the face of massive employer resistance. Editor-at-Large Harold Meyerson writes that without the Employee Free Choice Act, unions are often forced to organize outside the workplace, bringing massive political and public pressure on companies. EFCA would bring workers back into the process.

Compared to labor and the civil-rights movement, the bloggers and online activists of the Netroots are surely the new kids on the block, and they face challenges as well. As Eli Sanders reports, the Netroots put their energy into a Washington state congressional race but, despite some successes along the way, couldn't quite change the rules of old politics and the mainstream media.

This month we also inaugurate some changes to our Up Front section. We'll now feature one longer piece—this month, Ezra Klein's from the front lines of foodie politics—and a brief dialogue between two of our writers. In this issue, Dana Goldstein and Adam Serwer discuss GOP identity politics. It seems that change has come to even the Republican Party. — MARK SCHMITT

WOULD YOU RATHER DIE FOR A MYTH OR LIVE THROUGH MEDICAL RESEARCH?

Medical investigators in Spain have discovered that a compound in marijuana shrinks brain tumors.

THC injected directly into cancer tumors in mice will kill the bad cells without touching the healthy ones. Life threatening tumors just disappear. While it's a long way from mice brains to humans, this stunning breakthrough opens the door to a new arena of cancer research.*

Tragically, this amazing discovery had been made thirty years earlier in the U.S.—but the authorities were afraid it would "send the wrong message to our children."

It's time for the U.S. Government to sweep aside the political ideology about marijuana and let the scientists do their work. There are studies already underway that suggest marijuana may be effective in treating major diseases like Alzheimer's, Rheumatoid Arthritis and Multiple Sclerosis.

The Obama administration should reclassify marijuana to permit medical research. With an aging boomer population and spiraling health care costs, we need science, not folklore.

Common Sense for Drug Policy
www.CommonSenseDrugPolicy.org www.DrugWarFacts.org
www.ManagingChronicPain.org www.MedicalMJ.org
www.TreatingDrugAddiction.org
info@cscp.org

*see www.cscp.org for sources



FOODIE POLITICS

Alice Waters goes to Washington.

FOR ONE NIGHT IN D.C., politicians garnered less interest than pastry chefs. “That’s Daniel Boulud!” squealed one gourmand standing 4 feet from a lonesome-looking Carl Bernstein. Nearby, CNN analyst Jeffrey Toobin listened to a lecture on farm subsidies. An older man interrupted to ask Toobin his professional opinion: Wouldn’t Alice Waters make a great Cabinet secretary? Elsewhere, nervous politicos huddled as they discussed how best to approach *Top Chef* host Tom Colicchio. Finally, one walked up and questioned his judging decision from the previous week’s episode. Wrong tactic.

“Did *you* taste the food?” Colicchio shot back.

The occasion was a “family dinner”—in restaurant parlance, the humble meal the staff shares before the diners show up—hosted at the spacious home of cookbook author Joan Nathan. But this was no humble meal. And as word got out about the chef-studded affair, the guest list doubled—which was all the better. This was food with a purpose. Wrapped in a colorful scarf, Nathan gestured at the appetizers arrayed in her den. “This table is meant to represent the real, new America,” she explained. “We have Armenian grape leaves, and gravlax, and my

housekeeper Maria made rice and beans. I made hummus with preserved lemon and harissa. Boat people made spring rolls!”

The “family dinner” preceded D.C.’s premiere inaugural event for foodies: a series of \$500-a-plate charity dinner parties hosted by Waters, the founder of Berkeley’s famous Chez Panisse restaurant and the doyenne of America’s sustainable-food movement. The events, collectively called “Art.Food.Hope.,” served as Waters’ latest attempt to use the palate to change the politics of Washington. They heralded, she said, “a new beginning for the American table”—a table filled with fresh, sustainable, local, delicious foods. Waters’ own epicurean epiphany occurred at such a table; as a college student, she left the chaos of 1960s-era Berkeley and took respite in France. There, her first spoonful of *soupe des legumes* changed her forever. “I wanted to eat like that and live like that,” she said.

But getting politicians to promote the view that Americans should eat more like the French is a hard sell. Being a fat, unhealthy cow is as American as, well, apple pie and cheeseburgers. George H.W. Bush made much of his taste for pork

rinds. Bill Clinton happily publicized his appetite for McDonald’s. George W. Bush told Oprah how much he loved PB&J on white bread. None boasted of his affection for Chez Panisse’s \$95 *prix fixe*.

And that’s the other problem. Good food—the sort Waters features at her restaurant—is considered a luxury of the rich rather than a social-justice issue. As Waters frequently argues, no one is worse served by our current food policy than a low-income family using food stamps to purchase rotted produce at the marked-up convenience store. Her vision is classically populist: It democratizes the concrete advantages—health, pleasure, nutrition—that our current food system gives mainly to the wealthy.

But her language is suffused with the values and the symbols of, well, the sort of people who already eat at Waters’ restaurant. Thus, in promoting an agenda that benefits poor people with little access to fresh food, Waters tends to communicate mainly with rich people interested in fine dining.

To be fair, she has long sought to pass the torch to national politicians better equipped to speak to a broad audience. Back in the 1990s, she sent the Clintons letters and fruit baskets, hoping to convince them to plant

THE QUESTION:
ON WHICH WORLD
LEADER WILL THE
GOP MODEL ITS
COMEBACK?

“Elvis Presley, circa 1970; the sequined jumpsuits and photo ops with J. Edgar Hoover will at least help them hold onto their base.”
—Eric Alterman
The Nation



“The Wizard of Oz, who can conjure up all the things the Republicans need—a brain, a heart, and some courage.”
—David Halperin, former speechwriter for Bill Clinton

“By all appearances, they’re closely following the strategy of Hitler in his bunker, circa April 30, 1945.”
—Brian Cook
In These Times

organic gardens around the White House and use the bully pulpit in service of sustainable agriculture. In July of 1996, she had Bill Clinton and 30 of his top contributors—each paying \$25,000 a piece—for a dinner catered by Chez Panisse. She went through six cases of peaches to find 31 pristine enough for the occasion. Clinton left early, however, and all Waters could do was thrust his peach into his hand as he rushed out the door. She later heard he ate it in the elevator.

The Clintons did, in fact, plant a small vegetable garden on the White House roof, but it only provided enough produce to feed the first family—not exactly what Waters had in mind. Clinton never became the advocate she sought. (His 2004 quadruple bypass served as an example of another kind. So much for the Big Mac diet.) Similarly, Waters’ early attempts to connect with the Obamas—offers to serve in an informal “kitchen cabinet” and tour the White House kitchen—have been rebuffed. That’s not to say that Obama disagrees with her vision. He’s hired a Chicago chef, Sam Kass, who focuses on sustainable ingredients and speaks glowingly of “the table once again [claiming] a central place in the home, enriching our bodies, lives, and relationships.”
(continued on page 9)

PARODY by T. A. Frank

MEMO

TO: House and Senate GOP Caucus
FROM: Republican National Committee Strategy Group

Senators and House members, we appreciate all your suggestions for talking points that GOP leaders ought to be promoting in response to upcoming Democratic legislation. As we retool our party’s core message, we’ve gone through your ideas. Here’s some guidance and feedback on your submissions so far:

Stressing the benefits of tax cuts over spending

EXCELLENT: “We need to cut [business/payroll/corporate/sales/inheritance/alternative-minimum/real-estate] taxes—forever and ever and ever.”

FAIR: “Americans have irritable financial bowels, and they expect fast-acting, soothing tax relief.”

LESS EFFECTIVE: “High-net-worth Americans are getting really sad. Tax cuts could fix that.”

Stressing the wedge issues

EXCELLENT: “We don’t need to be spending \$4 trillion teaching 5-year-olds how to put condoms on babies.”

FAIR: “This bill is a fiscal Christmas tree for just the sort of secularists who hate Christmas.”

LESS EFFECTIVE: “This spending bill is really gay.”

Stressing the danger of big government

EXCELLENT: “This is a giant package of government-run, big-government spending on government jobs to make bigger government.”

FAIR: “This bill is socialist and possibly Stalinist, stealing hard-earned dollars out of taxpayer pockets and leading to the deaths of tens of millions.”

LESS EFFECTIVE: “This bill grows government even more than we did under Bush.”

Stressing the danger of spending

EXCELLENT: “We want a health-care bill, but Democrats want a spending bill.”

FAIR: “Spending is bad. Say, did we float our idea about cutting taxes?”

LESS EFFECTIVE: “You want spending. We want stimulus. Let’s go find some hookers.”

REP. JOHN BOEHNER (R-OHIO)



T.A. Frank is an Irvine Fellow at the New America Foundation.

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out of 800,000.

No slavery.

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in slavery or servitude;
slavery and the slave
trade shall be prohibited
in all their forms.*

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of Human Rights



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Last year we celebrated the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration
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\$9.5 billion is generated annually from human trafficking

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The Universal Declaration of Human Rights constitutes a contract
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that contract is enforced.

The victims of human trafficking are depending on you. Who else is there
to depend on?

MAKE HUMAN RIGHTS A FACT

www.YouthForHumanRights.org



Dinner-Party Prep: Alice Waters shops at a farmers market in D.C.

(continued from page 7)

Though Art.Food.Hope was wildly successful as a charity event—it raised more than \$100,000 for local soup kitchens and farmers markets—it was unclear how much progress was made toward Waters’ political goals. The politicians at one Art.Food.Hope event, appeared to be enjoying the briny oysters from Martha’s Vineyard, lamb shoulder braised in bay leaf, and Goldrush apple galette. (Mayor Cory Booker of Newark and D.C. Schools Chancellor Michelle Rhee attended, but rumored guests Joe Biden and John McCain didn’t show up.) However, it wasn’t clear that they would be publicly promoting the “new American table” anytime soon. It was the sort of dinner that would work well in an attack ad. A politician who spent a lot of time extolling the virtues of such dining would be served up medium-effete in his next election.

It’s not just her “elitist” food that keeps Waters from connecting with politicians. It’s her rhetoric. In a *New York*

Times article last April, Waters responded to rising food prices by urging consumers to “make a sacrifice on the cellphone or the third pair of Nike shoes.” Ouch. Chef-author Anthony Bourdain recently took direct aim at Waters’ “let them eat artisanal cheese” tendencies, complaining to the Web site DCist, “We’re all in the middle of a recession, like we’re all going to start buying expensive organic food and running to the green market. There’s something very Khmer Rouge about Alice Waters that has become unrealistic.”

But Waters’ vision is almost depressingly realistic. An America in which schoolchildren are assured fresh and nutritious meals and the government doesn’t spend billions subsidizing high-fructose corn syrup would be cheaper to the taxpayer and healthier for the nation. What we’d spend purchasing fresh produce we’d almost certainly save in medical bills. Our current food policy makes us fatter, sicker, and poorer.

And, as Waters reminds us, it tastes bad.

—EZRA KLEIN

DIALOGUE: REPUBLICANS AND RACE

Is the GOP making an effort at inclusiveness, or is the new RNC chair just a token?

DANA GOLDSTEIN: On Jan. 30, Maryland’s former lieutenant governor, Michael Steele, was elected the first African American chair of the Republican National Committee. The competition really brought out the crazy in the GOP. But it’s great to see that Steele’s victory annoys all the right people—namely the far right.

ADAM SERWER: Yeah, the Southern Poverty Law Center has been documenting the reaction from groups like the Council of Conservative Citizens, and they’re apoplectic. Steele isolates the unapologetic racists from the party, which basically means they have no home in the mainstream.

That said, the choice was really predictable. I assumed Steele would win from the beginning, because the Republicans are basically desperate to prove they’re not a whites-only party.

DANA: One thing I’m concerned about, though, is that this doesn’t really move the GOP to the center on immigration. Maybe anti-Latino bias will become the last refuge of the party’s nativists. Bush and Rove made a heroic effort to change minds within the conservative coalition. But I think they’ve failed, and I don’t see any more bipartisan support for comprehensive immigration reform.

ADAM: Well, Steele has previously sounded moderate on immigration, but as RNC chair, he’ll have to toe the party line. And since the GOP is taking policy advice from Joe the Plumber, its thoughts on immigration policy aren’t likely to become any more thoughtful. That said, the core of conservative nativism is the fear that immigrants will, in the words of Bill O’Reilly, destroy the “white male power structure,” so they probably aren’t feeling so welcome in Steele’s party, either. But for every Pat Buchanan there’s an Ezola B. Foster, so Steele might just decide there’s room in the party for the nativist wing.

DANA: The Republicans are really in copy-cat mode. First Hillary Clinton begat Sarah Palin in the primary. Then Barack Obama begat Michael Steele.

ADAM: I think my favorite comment on Steele came from Princeton professor Melissa Harris-Lacewell on *The Rachel Maddow Show*. She said, “I think what this pick shows is they are thinking Barack Obama is Superman. So what they needed to do was to get kryptonite. Kryptonite comes from Superman’s own planet. So they went to ‘planet black guy.’” Obviously I welcome any and all references to Superman.

DANA: Some conservative bloggers were angry that not every national paper put Steele’s election on the front page. But when his success is so clearly a reaction to Obama—not a grass-roots drive among Republicans to change the face of their party or reconsider their positions on race—it’s no wonder.

ADAM: Well, you also have to understand the motivation. Republicans aren’t so committed to changing the way they deal with race as they are committed to proving that they aren’t racist. When the media didn’t shout Steele’s win from the rooftops, it deprived Republicans of some immediate gratification.

But hey, maybe they have a point. It’s totally unfair. I mean, what’s so great about Obama? All he did was get elected president.

SUSAN WALSH / AP IMAGES

The Dual Mission

BY MARK SCHMITT

TO CHANGE THE CULTURE OF AMERICAN POLITICS: THAT was the radical promise on which Barack Obama was elected president. Ever since his days as a Chicago organizer and state senator, his first mission has been to bring people back in as participants in democracy, to clear out corruption,

to restore trust in government, and to replace empty partisanship with a real debate about national priorities.

But along the way, a second mission emerged, one he surely couldn't have anticipated when he launched his presidential campaign two years ago: to change the culture of American capitalism. The news that the Wall Street banks saw the Bush administration's bailout funds solely as a way to pay their customary millions in bonuses was a stunning reminder that even after the financial sector destroyed itself and came to Washington begging for public relief, the underlying all-you-can-grab mentality remained unaffected.

But to change politics is alone almost an impossible project. How can the Obama administration—any administration—achieve both of these transformative goals at once?

It may turn out, though, that these two missions are linked and easier to achieve together rather than separately. For one thing, the sicknesses in both cultures are connected. Recent politics has mirrored the attitudes of modern business. Wall Street and K Street had in common a winner-take-all mentality: a disregard for long-term consequences in favor of short-term results; a contempt for the very institutions—including government—that make wealth-creation possible. Awash in money and consumption, the most pernicious attitude on both Wall Street and K Street was that these things had

been earned and were a mark of merit.

Over the last 15 years or so, the small-potatoes character of Washington, where rich once meant a lobbyist who made \$300,000 and upper-middle-class was an assistant Cabinet secretary who made half that, gave way to the wealth scale of New York, where "real money" starts well into the millions. The phrase "entering the private sector" gained a unique meaning in Washington, where it involves making millions in a few years by providing "strategic advice" to firms that depend on government regulation or contracts.

The sickness in both cultures also has a common root. It can be traced to the late 1970s, when Reaganomics was born and the doctrine of "shareholder responsibility" (that a public corporation's only obligation was to deliver short-term profits to its current owners) took hold. The late 1970s also gave us the cult of the CEO-as-hero that led to Merrill Lynch boss John Thain's \$1.2 million office renovation.

Changing a culture isn't easy. It's not the same as changing formal rules or prohibiting certain activities. The White House's tight restrictions on lobbying send a strong message but won't touch those who operate at such a high level that they never have to register as lobbyists or cool their heels in a congressional recep-

tion area while waiting for a 10-minute meeting. During the election, Obama found success in creating an alternative to the dominant political culture. His base and his fundraising system, which mostly bypassed the traditional brokers, will have a far more long-term impact on political culture than will lobbying or campaign-finance rules.

The same is true in the economy. Obama has proposed restrictions on executive pay for banks that get federal welfare, which Wall Street might follow to the letter while ignoring in spirit. Changing the cultural assumptions and norms of Wall Street will take more than a hundred days, more than a few new regulations, and more than populist slap-downs. But while Obama's years of thinking about renewing democracy paid off, neither he nor anyone else has yet figured out exactly how to do the same for capitalism.

Fortunately for Obama, both the old politics and the old capitalism lie in ruins; their assumptions cannot be salvaged. He has already come some way in changing the culture of politics, including acting with respect toward those whose party was defeated in the last election. Though Obama has frustrated some pro-

gressive Democrats who see him as caving to the enemy, this is his attempt to defuse the winner-take-all culture of Karl Rove-era politics. To do the same in the economy, he'll have to create an alternative to this particular form of capitalist culture. Obama will have to build institutions that foster a new culture, one still driven by the quest for growth, innovation, and profit but where

the returns are more broadly shared and where stewardship and sustainability are valued more than today's share price. And if this time it is politics that reshapes capitalism, then the new culture that emerges will be one where even the winners in the economy appreciate that their wealth was made possible by a collective enterprise, government. **TAP**

Can one president transform democracy and capitalism?

Broad Rights

BY ANN FRIEDMAN

AFTER PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA SIGNED HIS first piece of legislation, the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act, he remarked that it was a victory for workers and for civil rights. He did not say it was a victory for women but that "making our economy work means

making sure it works for everyone."

I, for one, was thrilled. While the Supreme Court case that led to the Ledbetter legislation was mainly discussed in the context of gender discrimination, the rights restored by the passage of the Ledbetter Act truly *are* good for all workers. Hearing a president articulate this was nothing short of revolutionary. Women's rights are civil rights. Women's rights are human rights.

The reality that feminists have long grasped and conveyed to the public, with varying degrees of success, is that protecting women's rights is good for society as a whole. While different identity groups are often in need of different sorts of services or protections, their rights are, in fact, inseparable from those of the broader population. Yet historically, the rights of women, gay people, and people of color have been placed in separate boxes. Those who oppose these rights have not been taken to task for holding back society as a whole.

This dynamic is exceptionally stark in the debate over reproductive rights. If you ask most conservatives and even some liberals, reproductive rights are about women—and, perhaps a bit more broadly, about women's role in society. Undercutting reproductive health is not seen as a blow to the overall health of the nation—or indeed, the world. This is how we've gotten international policy that defines and regulates reproductive health services differently than other

medical aid. This is why some insurance plans are allowed to deny coverage for contraception. This is why funding for core health services for low-income women remains a political football.

During the campaign, Obama's staff stated, "Sen. Obama believes that reproductive health care is basic health care," acknowledging that reproductive health care "is an essential service—just like mental health care and disease management and other preventive services under his plan." And in a speech at Planned Parenthood in the summer of 2007, candidate Obama spoke at length about expanding the terms of the choice debate beyond the confines of abortion and contraception, to show how these rights are linked with the bigger, broader issues of health, work, and families.

But all that talk is pretty useless if, when it comes to actually passing legislation, President Obama caves to those who view reproductive health care as distinct from other types of care. In late January, as Congress debated the economic-stimulus package, Obama was eager to court Republicans by stripping out a provision that would have made it easier for states

to access federal family-planning money. Rather than see this for what it was—a way to reduce states' health-care costs—Obama acquiesced to the right-wing view that these services were somehow inessential. At the time, other health-care provisions remained in the bill.

While Obama pledged to introduce legislation to help states access family-planning funds, he never publicly articulated why he felt such a provision didn't make sense in the stimulus package. Promoting preventive care is widely seen as a good way to reduce health-care costs, which makes regular gynecological care especially important; annual "well woman" exams are preventive in nature. According to the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, many women consider their OB/GYN their primary-care doctor. (In fact, some health advocates have suggested creating a medical specialty for men's preventive health care as well, to get more men to see the doctor regularly.) And reducing the price tag of our health-care system is an effort that has clear bipartisan support. Ensuring more women are getting regular reproductive care is a means to that end.

This is not an isolated debate. Over the course of the next four years, there will be numerous fights over rights and health care, and Obama will be forced to decide, again and again, whether reproductive health is indeed an "essential service" or whether it is a political chess piece. In making tough decisions about health care—in big ways as he pursues an overhaul of the health-care system, and in smaller ways as he makes decisions about funding existing programs—I hope Obama

applies the same broad lens through which he viewed the Ledbetter legislation.

After all, what's good for women is good for the country. Making our health-care system work means making sure it works for everyone. **TAP**

Obama will be forced to decide whether reproductive health care is an essential service or merely a political chess piece.

The Other Black President

The NAACP confronts a new political—and racial—era.

BY ADAM SERWER

Ben Jealous steps through the metal detector in the Hart Senate Office building on Capitol Hill. He removes his black baseball cap and jacket, hunching over as he affixes a gold NAACP pin to his lapel before entering a press conference in support of Attorney General nominee Eric Holder. It's January, and the 35-year-old Jealous has been president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People for a mere four months.

As he stands behind the podium, rubbing shoulders with senators and other civil-rights leaders, his gaze drifts to the space between his shoes. After a few moments, he realizes he's on camera, and his chin jerks up as he rocks back on his heels a bit. When he takes the mic, he puts aside his prepared remarks and in a soft voice reminds the assembled crowd of reporters about the many civil-rights violations under the Bush administration. "With the Bill of Rights in tatters, with the Department of Justice in tatters, we need a man who can hold it together, and Holder is that man," Jealous says confidently. He halts and squints for a moment. "We need a *person* who can hold it together. Holder is that person."

The NAACP had only recently decided that Jealous was the man—er, person—who could hold it together. On the eve of its centennial year, the organization risks becoming a victim of its own success. The leader of the Western world is a black man named Barack Obama, and even Bill Cosby sounds optimistic about the future of black America. The organization that publicized lynching and awakened the conscience of the nation, litigated against segregation all over the country, and helped organize the 1964 March on Washington now finds itself suffering from dwindling membership and an inability to connect to youth. Where once the visible realities of segregation and discrimination either forced or inspired the best and brightest African Americans to join the NAACP, the civil-rights victories of the last century have given them other choices and opportunities.

"Even the so-called 'new black politics,' people who are Ivy League educated and all this, who want to transcend race, people like [D.C. Mayor Adrian] Fenty and [Philadelphia Mayor] Michael Nutter, have aligned themselves with forces that are not really connected to the old civil-rights guard," says Peniel Joseph, a professor of African and Afro-American studies at Brandeis University. "They're building on the legacy of civil rights and black power, but they portray

themselves as pragmatists rather than ideologically inclined."

While Jealous possesses much of the "new black politics" pedigree—an Ivy League degree, a Rhodes scholarship, an ease with business interests, and a professional demeanor that allows him to speak about issues of race to broad audiences—he chose to be an activist rather than a politician. "I think like everybody in my generation, we were encouraged to see it as all the great battles had been won," Jealous says. "But at the same time we were growing up in a period of increasing violence in the black community, in the Latino community. So the older we got, the more reality conflicted with the stories we were being told." Obama may be president, but black men are also incarcerated in record numbers, public schools remain segregated, the wealth of the middle class is tumbling, and AIDS is the No. 1 killer of black women ages 24 to 35.

Jealous is part community organizer, part savvy financial operator, and part tech geek. In less than a year as president, he has made converts out of his critics both within the NAACP and outside it, and he has modernized the organization by drawing young, gifted and black talent. In advance of the presidential election, Jealous developed a new online system to help the NAACP register thousands of voters. And he has used his fundraising connections to resolve the fiscal crisis left by his predecessor. "He knows just about everyone," says Tammy Tanner, an administrative assistant at the Rosenberg Foundation, the philanthropic organization Jealous ran before leaving for the NAACP. "He says, let's have wine and sit down and talk, and people are writing \$10,000 checks for him." When several donors pulled out of an NAACP fundraiser in San Francisco over the chapter president's opposition to the Proposition 8 gay-marriage ban, Jealous jumped on a plane to California and raised \$19,000 to fill the gap.

But before he could do any of this, Jealous had to convince the NAACP's board that he could keep the organization relevant in an era when many people are asking, does America still need a National Association for the Advancement of Colored People when colored people have advanced further than any of us ever dreamed?

LAST MAY, THE BOARD of the NAACP huddled into a Marriott Hotel in Baltimore to select its new president. The 64 members were sharply divided between two candidates: Benjamin Todd

Jealous and the Rev. Frederick Douglass Haynes III. The board's choice was stark. Haynes fit the mold of previous NAACP leaders, a pastor turned civil-rights crusader. An accomplished orator who turned a small Dallas congregation into an 8,000-member megachurch, he combined a charismatic presence with a business savvy the financially troubled NAACP desperately needed. Jealous, on the other hand, came from a tradition of mixing journalism with advocacy. He developed a strong reputation as a manager during stints as head of the National Newspaper Publishers Association (NNPA), an association of black newspapers, and as president of the Rosenberg Foundation.

In recent years, the NAACP brand had been badly tarnished. After the Rev. Ben Hooks, a movement veteran, resigned as president in the early 1990s, the organization's next two leaders were



tainted by sex scandals and fiscal mismanagement. In 2005, the NAACP elected Bruce Gordon, a former Verizon executive, who was considered a more business-friendly face for a more conservative time. But he too proved a poor financial manager, leaving the NAACP almost \$4 million in debt. Gordon, who spoke openly about America being in a "post-civil-rights era," also clashed ideologically with longtime Chairman Julian Bond and other board members. He resigned after less than two years.

This time, the board needed to pick a president who could handle vast fundraising responsibilities, manage its 300,000 members, restore fiscal prudence, and attract new blood. And the new president would have to do these things without, you know, embarrassing the NAACP. Supporters of Haynes argued that he was the safer bet. "Anyone who can build a church of four, five, six thousand members clearly shows he can bring people together and run a multimillion-dollar organization," said Pennsylvania Conference President Jerry Monedesire, who originally supported Haynes. But Bond threw his support behind Jealous, whose experience as a community organizer brought him closer to Bond's vision for the NAACP as a social-justice organization.

The board's marathon eight-hour debate session lasted until 2 A.M., when Jealous was finally selected by a vote of 34-21. Grumpy board members shuffled out of the meeting to air their

objections to the press—a marked contrast from just two years prior, when the newly elected Gordon strolled triumphantly into a room full of reporters. Many of the board members' complaints—that Jealous was inexperienced, dismissive of established leaders like Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson, or simply not an active enough member of the NAACP—were published by NNPA columnist George Curry who, despite being Jealous' longtime friend and colleague, disagreed with the board's decision. In a column he wrote about the increasing number of biracial blacks in leadership positions, Curry obliquely referenced Jealous' light skin tone, recalling a time when access to social gatherings of the black elite was often dependent on whether or not one was "light, bright, and damn near white."

Bond says that the issue also came up in private. During a closed-door meeting of the presidential search committee, one member questioned whether the light-skinned Jealous was a good choice for the voice of the NAACP. Bond was incensed. ("It would be beneath us to consider it," he says.) The next meeting, he brought in a copy of *Time* magazine from 1938 featuring famed NAACP leader Walter White, who was light enough to pass as white. The subject was never brought up again.

IT WAS A TYPICAL 1960S love story: Jealous' parents met while battling Jim Crow laws. Fred Jealous was used to being the only white guy thrown in jail for integrating lunch counters, and Ann Todd was active with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. After Fred was disowned by his family for marrying a black woman, he and Ann left their families on the East Coast to settle in Monterey County, California, which Ben Jealous describes as a community of disaffected activists of all stripes. Jealous was born in 1973, and by age 14 he was hitting the streets to register voters in anticipation of Jesse Jackson's presidential run. "It was a compelling ask," Jealous recalls. "If you were 40 years old and you had a 14-year-old on your doorstep asking you to vote, how could you say no?"

When Jealous enrolled at Columbia University in 1990, he began working as an organizer with the NAACP Legal Defense Fund. On campus, his activist streak got him in trouble. Protesting a plan to turn the site of Malcolm X's assassination into a research facility, Jealous was suspended for "aiding and abetting the obstruction of an entrance to a university facility for more than a very short period of time," he says, citing the charge from memory. So he made a pilgrimage to the South to join a struggle similar to the one that drew his parents together. Mississippi's three black colleges were slated to be closed, and Jealous organized with the local NAACP chapter to keep them open and fully funded.

While in Mississippi, he began working as a reporter for a weekly black newspaper called *The Jackson Advocate*, where his journalism training consisted of "reading *The Guardian* and getting [my] ass kicked by [publisher Charles Tisdale's] red pen." Tisdale viewed journalism as not just a way to provide information but also as a commitment to the black community, and working with him was a formative experience for Jealous. Tisdale's widow, Alice Thomas-Tisdale, who is now publisher of the *Advocate*, explains, "The black press believes that as

long as one [person] is held back, we all are. So it's more of an institution than just a source of information."

After cutting his teeth at the *Advocate* and then becoming its managing editor, Jealous returned to Columbia in 1997. With most of his friends gone and the struggle for apartheid finally over, Jealous was able to bring his grades up and win a Rhodes Scholarship. When he returned from Oxford in 1999, his experience at the *Advocate* led to a job as head of the NNPA. As president, Jealous struck a deal with Microsoft to finance the relocation of the organization's office to Howard University in Washington, D.C. He also set up a Web site that syndicates articles from all of its member papers. The NNPA now functions not only as an association of black newspapers but also as an online wire service and a training ground for journalism students.

Jealous' experiences are anchored in the struggle for civil rights, but he is perhaps the first NAACP president to have a background in human rights as well. In 2002, he left the NNPA to become the director of Amnesty International's American human-rights program, where he lobbied against racial profiling, particularly of Arab Americans and Muslims after September 11. When discussing civil-rights issues, Jealous frequently refers to other ethnic groups affected by discrimination or poverty, although his emphasis is on the community that raised him, that made him who he is. While previous generations of civil-rights leaders no doubt believed that the struggle for black civil rights was part of a struggle for the rights of all people, Jealous is keenly affected by that view, and it deeply informs his leadership of the NAACP. "For a hundred years [the NAACP has] consistently transformed this country for the better," Jealous says. "Not just for black people or some people but for all people."

Only a few years out of college, Jealous quickly climbed the ranks of the nonprofit world. In 2005, he was named president of the Los Angeles-based Rosenberg Foundation, which grants money to groups working in low-income communities. Jealous whipped the foundation into fiscal and managerial shape and directed its money toward an emerging method of dealing with mass incarceration: re-entry programs that help former inmates readjust to society and find work. Jealous plans to prioritize these issues as president of the NAACP. "A hundred years from now we're going to be judged by our grandchildren," he says. "They're going to look back, and they're going to say, this country had the most incarcerated on Earth. Young black people were the most incarcerated in modern history. What did you do about it?"

But Jealous got tired of simply funding activism. He wanted to return to the front lines. When friends in the civil-rights community started floating his name to the NAACP search committee, Jealous was interested. But he realized that he would have to move across the country to Baltimore in order to take the job.

Ultimately, it was the birth of his daughter that would make the decision for him. Jealous had met fellow activist and lawyer Lia Beth Epperson at a Hungarian pastry shop during his first

stint at Columbia University, and although they had fallen in love, work had kept them apart. But by the summer of 2002, they had reunited and married. As Jealous contemplated the move from Rosenberg, their newborn child was his primary consideration. He explains, "Being a young black parent in this country leaves you with an urgent desire to improve the world quickly." He decided the move was worth it.

FOR DECADES, THE NAACP was the first responder against injustices like segregation, discrimination, and brutality against blacks because the United States government refused to act on their behalf. But as progress was made and barriers fell, critics began to argue that the NAACP was merely a reactionary organization, stuck in the past and unsuited to the new era.



The Other Community Organizer: Ben Jealous speaks outside the NAACP headquarters after being elected its president, May 17, 2008.

In August 2007, when influential black blogger Gina McCauley first heard about a woman and her son who were gang-raped in the Dunbar Village housing project in Florida, she called the NAACP. She says the organization told her that responding to the crime "wasn't in their mission." But while the national office declined to take a position either way, the local NAACP chapter in Boca Raton eventually did speak out—on behalf of the suspected perpetrators, alleging that they had been treated unfairly by the courts. For McCauley and others, the experience proved that the NAACP was out of touch: it responded to racism but not to broader social issues that affect the community, such as black-on-black crime.

Even when it has been proactive, the NAACP has had trouble connecting with young black Americans. When the organization held a ritual "burial of the N-word" two years ago, it seemed comically tone-deaf to the word's frequent use among young blacks, Latinos, and even some whites. To young people, "the NAACP is a relic of another age," says author and journalist Juan Williams. "When I was covering the NAACP ... I wrote they were a bunch of gray-haired revolutionaries. And that was in the '80s."

The NAACP has faced generational conflicts since the 1960s,

when young activists broke off and formed or joined organizations like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, but it has always persevered, possibly due to the strength of its history and brand. Today, the NAACP sometimes finds itself outmaneuvered by grass-roots groups like James Rucker's Color of Change, an online activist network whose quick rise to prominence suggests there is a space for advocacy the NAACP simply isn't taking advantage of. "The NAACP has had difficulty demonstrating its relevance to people who weren't already true believers," Rucker says.

Still, he emphasizes, even the most effective new civil-rights groups don't have the infrastructure to compete with the NAACP, with its hundreds of chapters and vast lobbying experience.

"OUR FOCUS IS ON THE NEEDS OF BLACK AMERICA; THAT'S WHAT WE DO BEST; THAT'S WHERE WE'RE KNOWN BEST. BUT OUR GOAL IS A FULLY FUNCTIONING DEMOCRACY" FOR ALL OF AMERICA.

"We're not trying to beat the NAACP," Rucker says. "My goal is to amplify each other's efforts. Given the issues that we face, we need everything that we got to make change happen."

But the fact is many civil-rights-minded youth are coming to activism through groups like Rucker's, not the NAACP. The struggle that originally brought young people to the NAACP is over. There are no segregated lunch counters, no poll taxes, no lynching epidemic. After years of fighting for equal rights through organizing, litigation, and lobbying, the barriers to the most powerful positions in the land have been breached.

Jealous sees these successes—and the challenges they bring—as an opportunity rather than a death knell. "Our founders said we were going to eradicate lynch mobs; 30 years later we did it. In 1918, we said we were going to desegregate the military; 30 years later we did it. In 1932, we said we were going to outlaw Jim Crow; 22 years later we did it. In 1954, we said we were going to desegregate every institution in this country, from the local school to the global corporation. ... It took 40 years, but we succeeded. In 1960, we said we were going to level the political playing field; we've done it," Jealous says. "It's okay in our mind to pick not a three-year goal but a 30-year goal, because that's how we've succeeded consistently."

For Jealous, mass incarceration is the civil-rights challenge of this generation. Addressing it, he says, requires more than just changing draconian drug laws; it also requires confronting poverty and a failing public-education system. Young black folks, particularly the urban poor who most need an organization like the NAACP to look out for them, are facing problems of violence, drugs, AIDS, and unequal education.

Most civil-rights activists, and even their critics, agree with Jealous that this is the biggest civil-rights challenge of the modern era—they just disagree on how to meet it. John

McWhorter of the conservative Manhattan Institute says that a dysfunctional black culture, not racism, is the issue, and it can only be addressed internally. "The proper thing for a civil-rights organization to do today is to go into services," McWhorter says.

Jealous, however, argues that the NAACP needs to stick to its roots—advocating for better public policy. Providing services isn't the NAACP's role, he argues. "Some people would like to see us be an alternative government infrastructure for black people," Jealous says. "I understand where that comes from; the reality is that's what we've been fighting against for 100 years. What we've been fighting for is for the government that we already have to respond to the needs of all people. Our focus is on the needs of black America; that's what we do best; that's where we're known best. But our goal is a fully functioning democracy."

DURING THE 2004 DEMOCRATIC National Convention speech that made him a star, Barack Obama invoked the idea of a nation where the inner-city resident and the rural factory worker are equally American. Fulfilling this promise is why the NAACP was created. There could not be a Barack Obama without the NAACP, and yet the organization faces particular challenges in lobbying this president—the most popular black political figure in history.

Some people have learned the hard way just how tricky it can be. During the campaign, when media personality Tavis Smiley criticized Obama for not paying enough attention to black problems, the ensuing uproar caused Smiley to cancel upcoming media appearances. Radio host Tom Joyner told his listeners that Smiley "couldn't take the hate."

Jealous must figure out how to hold Obama accountable without drawing "the hate." Melissa Harris-Lacewell, a professor of politics and African American studies at Princeton, is optimistic. The NAACP "could become the authentic supportive and yet challenging voice to the Obama administration," she says.

This is the role Jealous envisions. "It would be disrespectful not to criticize [Obama]," he says. "If we don't let the brother know when he's not living up to people's expectations, he's only going to be there four years."

Whether Jealous can restore the NAACP to its former glory and help the organization hold its own in the crowd of special interests jockeying for the president's attention is an open question. While Obama may be uniquely sympathetic to the NAACP's agenda, his popularity among black folks and ephemeral personal connections to the organization might limit their influence. Jealous needs to do more than remind young people that the NAACP is fighting for them; he needs to convince them that the NAACP has their interests in mind even when the president doesn't.

On the day before Obama's inauguration, Jealous spoke to a small gathering of reporters at an NAACP reception in Washington. When asked what Obama's rise meant for the NAACP, Jealous simply said, "History has proven the fallacy of the Moses archetype for black leadership."

One person, even the president, is no substitute for a movement. **TAP**

DEPARTMENT OF CHANGE

Five places to start remaking the government

"The question we ask today is not whether our government is too big or too small, but whether it works," Barack Obama said during his Inaugural Address.

A government that works seems like an obvious goal. But conservatives in the Bush administration and their ideological predecessors in the Reagan administration made an art out of using government against government, especially in sub-Cabinet positions that fly below most observers' radar. Though conservatives have never come close to actually shrinking the federal bureaucracy, they have succeeded in preventing government from doing its job—a nice judo trick.

Voters repudiated that philosophy on Election Day. With a mandate to fix government, Obama's new appointees have the opportunity to try some jujitsu of their own by using federal offices where scandals were hatched, science was ignored, and the law was shattered to promote sound public policy. But making government work is only half the mission. The next step, implementing a truly liberal public-policy agenda, demands vision and a willingness to use the full potential of the government.

As Obama takes office, the heads of the biggest executive-branch departments have, understandably, received the bulk of the media coverage. But Cabinet secretaries cannot personally oversee their entire department and are often occupied with major agenda items. At lower rungs on the ladder, the right appointee has more control—and thus more ability to create real change. When the president and his Cabinet put forth major initiatives, these officials are the ones who will actually execute them, making decisions along the way that determine whether the policies will succeed or fail.

Here are five offices to watch as Obama's administration attempts to realize its agenda.

—TIM FERNHOLZ



OFFICE OF INFORMATION AND REGULATORY AFFAIRS

MANDATE: Act as a clearinghouse for all federal regulations, from environmental rules to work-safety guidelines, in an effort to help centralize the complex regulatory process.

THE CONSERVATIVE APPROACH: Stop regulation. The Reagan administration used OIRA as a veto point—reviewing, and rejecting, thousands of regulations proposed by federal agencies each year. The office blocked regulations that could have provided environmental protections, moderated health risks in food and medicine, and kept employees safe at work. George W. Bush's first appointment as OIRA director was John Graham, who had previously led an AT&T Wireless-funded study that, predictably, found that driving while using a cell phone isn't dangerous. In his first year at OIRA, Graham rejected more regulations than were refused during the entire Clinton administration.

THE LIBERAL APPROACH: Create a regulatory regime for the modern economy. Obama has appointed well-known Harvard Law professor Cass Sunstein to head the office, indicating that the new administration has bold plans for it. Sunstein is known as a pragmatic thinker, and his credentials have been questioned by some progressives who see his approach to regulatory regimes as too similar to that of the last administration's. But Sunstein has reiterated his commitment to strong regulation, and given that many of the new president's policy goals won't be achieved without effective rule-making, there is good reason to believe he will be a force for improvement within OIRA. Indeed, though Sunstein favors the cost-benefit approach to regulations used by Graham, he will likely factor in the costs like climate change and income inequality that never crossed conservatives' minds.



OFFICE OF LEGAL COUNSEL

MANDATE: Provide "authoritative legal advice" to the entire executive branch, especially in the case of a disagreement between different departments.

THE CONSERVATIVE APPROACH: Pave the way for presidential acts, unfettered by traditional checks and balances. In the wake of the September 11 attacks, the OLC's chief, Jay Bybee and his deputy, John Yoo, used the "unitary executive" theory to frame legal opinions justifying torture, warrantless surveillance of American citizens, and other radical expansions of presidential power. The next head of the OLC, Jack Goldsmith, resigned after attempts to change the administration's policy led to conflict with other Bush officials.

THE LIBERAL APPROACH: Cancel the opinions providing legal cover for unlawful and immoral actions, and review the rest. This office can play a large role in ensuring a careful balance between America's ideals and its security, so that neither one undermines the other. The new assistant attorney general in charge of the OLC is Dawn Johnsen, a former law professor who recently published a law-review article outlining specific ways to undo the controversial legal gambits that characterized the OLC during the Bush years and to return proper legal constraints to the executive. The office has already played a part in rolling back the past administration's torture and rendition policies with executive orders issued in the first week of the Obama presidency. The next step is to review and declassify other secret opinions in order to provide more government transparency.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY MICHAEL SLOAN



FEDERAL STUDENT AID OFFICE

MANDATE: Administer the various federal student-loan programs, including Pell grants, Stafford loans, PLUS loans, and Federal Work Study, among others.

THE CONSERVATIVE APPROACH: Provide corporate welfare, and cut student assistance. Conservative overreliance on the private sector led this office to favor corporations over students. The Bush administration also failed to increase the maximum Pell Grant, even though its real value has been diminishing for years. In addition, it allowed student-loan interest rates to rise, and it cut funds for program management. For the first six years of the Bush administration, the office funneled millions of dollars in unnecessary subsidies to private lenders. (The office had the power to stop these ballooning payments but chose not to for years.) The FSA also failed to uncover illegal payments from student lenders to college officials. Numerous FSA employees formerly worked in the private student-lending industry; one official, Matteo Fontana, owned \$100,000 worth of stock in a corporation the office supervised and made several rulings in favor of private financial-aid companies.

THE LIBERAL APPROACH: Put students first. The FSA could use its power to simplify the confusing student-loan programs and advocate for more use of the Federal Direct Loan Program, which cuts out private-lender middlemen to provide loans directly to students. This could save the government millions—while at the same time increasing access to higher education. Officials should also strictly enforce lending rules and provide rigorous oversight. Obama has already taken a step in this direction. With his first series of executive orders, he ended some revolving-door hiring practices, which means the FSA is now likely to employ fewer former banking-industry veterans.



OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY AND HEALTH ADMINISTRATION

MANDATE: Prevent work-related injuries, illnesses, and deaths.

THE CONSERVATIVE APPROACH: Let corporations make their own rules. The Bush administration's last OSHA chief, Edwin Foulke, had previously worked at a union-busting law firm. Foulke focused on a "voluntary compliance strategy," which meant OSHA essentially allowed businesses to police themselves. The administration also underfunded the agency. Due to budget cuts and fewer employees, this year OSHA has set a goal of 37,700 workplace inspections—a fraction of the nearly 9 million establishments overseen by the department. Meanwhile, the Office of Labor Management Standards, which monitors unions' compliance with federal rules, grew 90 percent under Bush. The administration also imposed only one major safety rule and issued only one health standard—because a federal court required it.

THE LIBERAL APPROACH: Increase enforcement and raise safety standards. While encouraging voluntary safety programs is important, OSHA needs to target high-risk industries for inspection. Identifying low-wage sectors, like the garment industry, where abuse of minimum-wage and overtime laws is frequent will allow enforcement actions to be more effective. Edward Montgomery, a former Department of Labor official, recommends performing several "high-impact enforcement actions" within the first year of the new administration to send a sector-wide message that OSHA will be using its authority to protect workers. Improving record-keeping to get a better grip on the number of actual workplace injuries is another important step after allegations that the previous administration's methods did not reflect the actual rate of injury, leading to poor worker-safety policies across the government.



ADMINISTRATION FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

MANDATE: Manage welfare programs and national health initiatives.

THE CONSERVATIVE APPROACH: Don't worry about economic security, focus on non-empirical social policy. Under the Bush administration, budgets remained stagnant—that is, they declined in real terms—hurting both the access to and quality of the ACF's programs. Now, as the recession increases the demand for social services, both the ACF and the states (which often shoulder half the funding burden) are overstretched. Wade Horn, who was the assistant secretary for Children and Families for most of the previous administration, mainly worked on social programs that pushed the conservative agenda, such as the Healthy Marriage Initiative and abstinence-only sex education, despite numerous studies demonstrating their ineffectiveness.

THE LIBERAL APPROACH: Redirect funds to help struggling families, and use the ACF as a laboratory for smart new anti-poverty programs. Now more than ever, the community that the ACF serves will be in need; even before the financial crisis, 39 percent of the nation's children were part of low-income families. Because programs that assist children and families are scattered across the bureaucracy from Labor to Agriculture, experts suggest the ACF would be a natural home for an integrated strategy or task force to meet family needs. The ACF can play a role in researching more effective assistance programs to respond to the recession. The agency should also eliminate funding for abstinence-only education and instead fund comprehensive sex-ed programs that work. And rather than focus on marriage initiatives that don't pan out, it should look at an array of promising fatherhood programs that promote responsible family participation.

You Can Handle the Truth

How far will Obama take his professed commitment to transparency?

BY TARA MCKELVEY

William Leonard, the former head of classification procedures for the government under President George W. Bush, was settling into his new life in St. Mary's County, Maryland, after his retirement in late 2007. He planned to teach political science at a small liberal-arts college and tend his garden, leaving behind the world of government and classified documents. But several months later, he came across a news story about an Office of Legal Counsel memo that had been classified for national-security reasons and only recently released. Leonard turned on his home computer and downloaded the memo, an 81-page document about interrogation policy that assistant attorney general John Yoo had written in March 2003. The memo had no information that would endanger national security. Instead, it was a legal defense of harsh interrogations. "You know, I guess 'angered me' would be the appropriate phrase," Leonard says describing his reaction. The memo had been withheld, he says, to shield the document from military lawyers who opposed the interrogation methods.

He went out to his garden after reading the memo. "I was weeding and saying, 'I got to do something,'" he says. "I got lots of weeds, so I was doing a lot of muttering." Several months later, Leonard, who worked for the government for 34 years, testified at a Senate Judiciary Constitution Subcommittee hearing that the memo was one of the "worst abuses of the classification process" he had ever seen.

Declassification, at its most basic level, provides the raw material that historians, students, journalists, and all Americans need to understand the nation's past. The process is far more than a formality; it is crucial to learning the truth about everything from Bush's decision-making to the Kennedy assassination to Gulf War syndrome. Each administration's policies—its stance on classification of its own information and declassification of historical documents—demonstrate whether it intends to close off or open up history.

On President Barack Obama's first day in office, he spoke about the importance of "transparency and the rule of law." In addition, he signed several executive orders that set out new guidelines for a clear and open government, including one that requires the president to seek advice from the solicitor general about the classification of documents. He is not the first chief executive

officer to pledge transparency. Bill Clinton was reluctant to disclose certain things (such as the details of his Whitewater real-estate deals), but overall he was a leader in the movement toward the declassification of documents. When the National Archives conducted an audit in 2006, researchers found that 1 billion pages of documents had been released in the years since 1995, a fourfold increase over the previous decade and a half.

The Bush administration, however, was notoriously withholding. And it wasn't just historical classified documents that the administration kept under wraps. In Bush's first term, he held only 17 solo question-and-answer sessions with reporters—the fewest of any president in the television age. Former Vice President Dick Cheney even bragged about the fact that he kept few notes and planned to leave no paper trail.

With Bush gone, transparency advocates are wondering how much Obama will fight to expose decisions made by Bush—and by previous presidents. And how much will he be willing to open up his own government?

IN SOME CASES, WE KNOW which documents are classified—we just don't know exactly what they say. It is no longer a secret that Bush issued a directive allowing the creation of secret prisons overseas—we know the sites were built—but the written authorization for these sites has not been released. Also classified are dozens of photographs that reportedly show Americans abusing prisoners at detention sites other than Abu Ghraib. That's just scratching the surface.

Jameel Jaffer, director of the American Civil Liberty Union's national-security project, and other attorneys have filed lawsuits to obtain the memos, images, and documents. So far, Jaffer has been unsuccessful in these cases. And not because of security concerns. The reason, he says, is simple: "We think the memos are being withheld not for security reasons but to insulate the officials for possible criminal liability," he says. Much like the interrogation policy that had Leonard muttering angrily in his garden.

In many of these cases, administration officials have used a "state-secrets defense," in which the government claims the information would endanger national security, even though the documents reveal little or nothing to that end. It has proved a highly effective strategy for quashing lawsuits and public debate over the

documents. For lawyers like Jaffer, this is galling. Even the most enthusiastic advocates of transparency, however, agree that there *are* legitimate claims to the state-secrets defense. Certain documents should be withheld to protect Americans from attack or, for example, to keep military strategies secret, especially during times of war. The problem is that classification can be abused.

Obama has shown publicly that he is not eager to prosecute former members of the Bush administration for alleged criminal acts. On ABC's *This Week*, on Jan. 11, 2009, George Stephanopoulos asked Obama whether or not he would pursue an investigation of crimes committed by Bush administration officials, "including torture and warrantless wiretapping." Instead of describing a path toward prosecution, Obama said, "We need to look forward as opposed to looking backward."

Yet even if he does not want to hold individuals accountable, there are reasons to release the documents. "I see these as two separate issues," Leonard says. Getting a hold of the documents might not lead to criminal prosecution, but the papers would allow people to see where the classification process has been misused and would perhaps help prevent over-classification from happening in the future.

George Bush and Dick Cheney are certainly not the only officials who have hidden documents for the wrong reasons. In fact, there is a 50 percent total over-classification rate, according to former Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Counterintelligence and Security Carol A. Haave. In some cases, government employees who are responsible for determining whether or not a document should be made public err on the side of caution and prevent its release—though the document may, in fact, be eligible for declassification.

"The deeper problem is when you create within an agency a culture of secrecy, such as at the CIA and FBI, it's virtually impossible to get them to change that culture and to cough things up," says G. Robert Blakey, a law professor at the University of Notre Dame Law School who served as chief counsel to a 1979 House committee investigating the Kennedy assassination. "The ultimate thing is power. It's to have control. This is the underlying issue of government."

PERHAPS THE MOST FAMOUS case in which documents that have been kept secret from the public—and have stoked endless conspiracy theories, paranoia, and rumors—is the Kennedy assassination. Documents that could shed light on the late CIA officer George Joannides and his relationship with Fidel Castro, for example, should have been released long ago—but, decades later, they still remain secret. "My God, nobody's alive today," Blakey tells me. "My kids say, 'Dad, if there's a conspiracy, it must have been you and Castro. You're the only ones left standing.'"

Often the best way to end speculation about governmental affairs is to release the documents so the real story can be told. Obama has supported this approach to governing, and



his transition team has come up with recommendations for improving the current system of declassification. Still, some people have concerns. "Many of his recommendations pointed backwards, towards undoing what the Bush administration has done, rather than to a qualitatively new information security policy," writes Steven Aftergood, director of the Federation of American Scientists' Project on Government Secrecy, in his e-mail newsletter, *Secrecy News*.

Aftergood and other experts are hoping that Obama will establish a National Declassification Center, a proposal that Obama endorsed during his campaign. The center would streamline the process of declassification, setting up a clearinghouse for decisions on releasing documents rather than leaving that to officials at individual agencies, where efficiency regarding declassification procedures can vary. CIA officers are pretty good at

managing their workload, Leonard says, but officials at the Defense Department, for example, would benefit from a center that would help expedite the process.

Meanwhile, Obama's personnel announcements are a step toward a more open government. John Podesta, who co-chaired Obama's transition team, has a record of fighting for declassification. As chief of staff for President Clinton, Podesta helped develop an executive order on declassification that has been heralded by experts. Leon Panetta, the new head of the CIA, led much of the Clinton-era declassification efforts. Obama chose Eric Holder, who served as deputy attorney general under Clinton, for attorney general, and Elena Kagan, dean of Harvard Law, as solicitor general. These individuals, as well as many of the others who have been appointed by Obama, have shown in their writings and public statements that they believe in transparency in government.

"Collectively, this is a group of people who seem to be committed to the rule of law," says the ACLU's Jaffer. In addition, Obama has put forward Dawn Johnsen, who teaches constitutional law at Indiana University, to head up the Justice Department's Office of Legal Counsel (OLC). That is, of course, the place where Yoo's memos on interrogations originated. "What makes her such a thrilling choice is that she has been an outspoken critic of the secrecy at the OLC," Aftergood says. "That appointment all by itself heralds a dramatic shift."

But despite Obama's promises to run the nation openly, he runs the same risk that every president does. "He's just another human being. People will want to check his policies, and he will want to control the information," Blakey says. He believes that the Bush administration's climate of secrecy will have to be changed by more than new laws and bureaucratic restructuring. In addition, Obama should convey a message of transparency through speeches and public displays.

As Blakey says, "Somebody has to constantly remind him that there was a day when he was not president, and we're just giving him the power for a term. It's not his; it's ours. It's an attitude, from top to bottom." **TAP**

MORE ONLINE Cataloging the Bush administration's misdeeds www.prospect.org/onlineextras

MICHAEL SLOAN

Where Are the Workers?

Employees are losing their central place in union organizing, but card-check legislation could turn that around.

BY HAROLD MEYERSON

One sparkling day about 10 years ago, I drove from Los Angeles to Santa Barbara to deliver a talk at a nationwide staff retreat of the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees International Union (HERE). I can't recall exactly what I talked about, but I remember distinctly whom I was talking to. The HERE staffers—there were about 70 of them—were all corporate researchers, most of them from HERE's locals.

This was something new. For some time, locals in America's more vibrant unions had employed organizers, but no union I knew of—until that day—had embedded corporate researchers in their locals as well. The researchers I met that afternoon were preponderantly young and uniformly bright. But HERE's decision to create a cadre of corporate campaigners was based on the grimmest of facts: Traditional private-sector union organizing—signing up workers who want to join a union, winning a certification election conducted by the government, and securing a collective-bargaining agreement in negotiations with the employer—had become a dead-end.

I discovered that day in Santa Barbara that HERE had concluded there was not a single hotel that could be organized absent a campaign to bring so much financial, political, and community pressure on the employer that it would agree not to oppose unionization. The mere desire of workers to form a union no longer sufficed.

By the 1990s, 30 percent of American employers routinely discharged employees during organizing drives, 49 percent threatened workers with the prospect of closing up shop if they voted to go union, 91 percent compelled workers to attend one-on-one meetings with their supervisors, and many delayed certification elections interminably and refused to agree to a first contract even if the union was legally certified. Employer willingness to violate the terms of the National Labor Relations Act (and suffer the negligible penalties it imposed on them) rather than let their workers unionize had become the norm in American business.

Accordingly, the very act of organizing has gone through a sea change at the nation's better unions and has been all but abandoned by the rest. With employers delaying elections and unions avoiding them, the number of National Labor Relations

Board-supervised elections has declined steadily for several decades and has dropped by 41 percent over the past decade alone. One factor *not* standing in the way of union elections is employees' desire to belong to a union, which has been increasing for the past 15 years. Recent polling shows that 53 percent of nonunion workers would like to have a unionized workplace.

The only option open to unions seeking to organize private-sector workers has been to reach agreements with employers that sidestep the NLRB process altogether. The Service Employees International Union (SEIU), the Communications Workers of America (CWA), the now-merged union of clothing and hotel workers (UNITE HERE), the Teamsters, and a few others continue their work to build union support among rank-and-filers but now supplement that work by waging so-called “corporate campaigns,” bringing financial or political pressure on corporate employers to compel them to not oppose unionization efforts. Beginning in the 1980s, these unions created corporate-strategy offices. They began asking elected officials to devise laws and rules that helped friendly employers and hurt union-busters. And they hired community organizers to build support for unionizing campaigns among churches and other potential allies.

Of necessity, many of these campaigns are conducted in arenas far removed from the workplaces the unions seek to organize. Some require the intense involvement of the workers seeking union status. Some don't. What sometimes emerges is a kind of top-down, “let's make a deal” unionism that results in an agreement covering workers who may not even have been aware that the unionization campaign was under way. It's a far cry from bottom-up organizing, but its proponents make a plausible case that given the erosion of the protections that labor law once provided workers, bottom-up organizing no longer works.

Labor and business are set to square off in the coming congressional battle over the Employee Free Choice Act (EFCA), which would create new legal protections for workers seeking to join or form a union by enabling them to attain recognition if a majority of them sign union-affiliation cards (a method known as “card check”). The bill is essential to any sustainable economic recovery, as unions offer the nation its best chance to attain broadly shared prosperity. (After all, the only period in American history in which productivity gains were widely



shared was also the only period of high unionization—the three decades after World War II, which saw the creation of history's first middle-class majority.)

EFCA is an essential step toward simplifying organizing and restoring workers to the center of the process. It wouldn't eliminate the need for the corporate researchers or the community organizers or global campaigns. But it would give workers who want to form a union in their workplace a shot at doing it without the kind of years-long, worldwide struggles that are now necessary to enable workers to bargain collectively.

THE MOST SUCCESSFUL union-organizing efforts of recent decades have all been complicated campaigns in which worker mobilization was just one part of a larger canvass. HERE's most celebrated campaign was that of its Las Vegas local to organize the city's hotel workers. The effort resulted in contracts with virtually every major hotel on Vegas' Strip, and the local grew from 18,000 members in the late 1980s to nearly 60,000 members today—roughly 90 percent of all major Vegas hotels' employees.

The growth of the Vegas local can be attributed to both bottom-up and top-down organizing. No local has more active worker committees, and its members have a legendary ability to sustain a strike—most famously, their strike against the nonunion Frontier Hotel, which lasted more than six years in the mid-1990s, without a single worker crossing the picket line, until the owners capitulated. But the growth of the union is also a function of the economic and political power it has wielded to either help or pressure owners, as circumstances dictated.

In the late 1980s, when casino-magnate Steve Wynn was building the first of his gigantic themed hotels that would transform the Vegas Strip, the local struck a deal with him to ensure his new hotels would be open to organizing. HERE offered simpli-

fication of its work rules, and its political assistance in killing a pending Internal Revenue Service rule to withhold the casino winnings of non-citizens, which would have damaged Vegas' trade in global high-rollers. In return, Wynn agreed to card-check at his new hotels.

Over the past two decades, no union has grown nearly as much as SEIU, which has seen its membership increase by at least 700,000 since Andy Stern became its president in 1996. The union's best-known organizing campaigns, those of the janitors who clean the office buildings in America's downtowns, have combined brilliant worker-mobilization efforts with full-court financial pressure on the employers. Even in anti-union Houston, SEIU successfully organized 5,300 mostly immigrant janitors in 2006. Over several years, SEIU built a strong base of support both within the city's janitorial work force and within the city's political and religious institutions.

But winning a contract took more than worker marches and media attention. The reason the 2006 drive succeeded where its mid-1990s predecessor failed, says Stephen Lerner, the chief strategist for the union's Justice for Janitors campaign, is that by the mid-2000s, many of Houston's office buildings were owned by global investors, and the five cleaning contractors that employed the majority of the city's janitors were either national or global companies. Where the union had little leverage over local contractors and owners, it could apply real pressure to national and even global institutions. Union pension funds were investors in the national real-estate investment trusts that owned much of downtown Houston, and they prodded the building owners to settle.

Indeed, in their efforts to organize American workers, unions have increasingly found themselves having to organize the

Six Long Years: Picketers march in front of the Frontier Hotel and Casino on the Las Vegas Strip, August 27, 1997.

JACK DEMPSEY / AP IMAGES

world. Last year, SEIU used its global leverage to win the right to organize Wackenhut security guards. It began the campaign in 2002, but three years later, Wackenhut, a historically anti-union company of 35,000 U.S.-based security guards, became part of the immense British conglomerate G4S, which is second only to Wal-Mart as the world's largest private-sector employer. The only way to organize Wackenhut in the U.S., SEIU determined, was to organize G4S globally. SEIU launched an ambitious campaign with its international affiliates, which included efforts to keep Wackenhut from receiving the security contract for the 2012 London Olympics; lawsuits in British, Indian, Indonesian, and Panamanian courts; and strikes by G4S employees across Africa.

Awash in a global sea of troubles, on Dec. 16, 2008, G4S signed a groundbreaking agreement with the global network of unions, agreeing to obey national labor laws in each of the 115 countries where the company has a presence and honor a neutrality pledge during most unionization campaigns. As part of that pledge, SEIU won the right to run card-check campaigns for Wackenhut employees in the nine-largest American cities. "No global agreements have come about with this kind of company through this kind of process before," says Christy Hoffman, SEIU's director of global organizing.

The implications of SEIU's Wackenhut campaign are both inspiring and alarming. Even though it marks the most concrete example yet of workers of the world uniting for mutual gain, consider what it says about organizing within the United States. It's easier to seek legal relief based on the global guidelines for multinational corporations than to obtain protection from the National Labor Relations Act, which was written to promote union organizing in America. Then there's the most sobering lesson of all: If you want to organize security guards in Chicago, you have to organize the whole damn planet.

Not every campaign in this new era manages to strike a real balance between worker organizing and corporate pressure. Some of SEIU's other campaigns have proceeded more top-down than bottom-up—and illustrate the trade-offs that the union has made in order to keep growing. Four years ago, SEIU negotiated an agreement with a nursing-home chain in Washington state in which the chain agreed to let SEIU unionize some of its homes in return for SEIU's help in getting the state government to authorize higher Medicaid payments. Under the terms of the agreement, which became widely controversial within SEIU, it was up to the chain, not the union, to designate which nursing homes would go union. One year later, SEIU and UNITE HERE entered into similar arrangements with the global food-service companies Sodexho and Aramark, though they have subsequently compelled Sodexho to lessen its role in the selection process.

Critics charge that "let's make a deal" unionism leaves no real role for workers in the organizing process and minimizes their involvement in negotiating their contracts. In addition, they argue, the employers' ability to maintain unorganizable,

nonunion workplaces depresses the wages and benefits of the workers in the unionized facilities. SEIU officials, while privately conceding that top-down contracts are less than stellar, argue that their critics offer no plausible alternative to this organizing model. Given the current state of labor law, these half-a-loaf arrangements are both the best that can be achieved for workers and the only way the union can gain a foothold to win better contracts in future years.

The absence of the worker from the organizing process is a direct consequence of the lack of legal protections currently afforded American workers—a hole in our democracy that the Employee Free Choice Act would patch. Today, even if workers themselves express a desire to organize, virtually every American union feels compelled to tell those workers that their effort will fail absent an all-out corporate campaign against their employer. Worker self-organization in America is as dead as the dodo unless EFCA is passed.

THE MOST SOBERING LESSON OF ALL: IF YOU WANT TO ORGANIZE SECURITY GUARDS IN CHICAGO, YOU HAVE TO ORGANIZE THE WHOLE DAMN PLANET.

IF THE EMPLOYEE FREE Choice Act is enacted, will unions be able to downscale their corporate campaigns and dismantle their global alliances? Not really.

"Corporations will continue to employ union-busters," says Stewart Acuff, the AFL-CIO's director of organizing, "and they will do it earlier." The ferocious anti-unionism of American employers is unlikely to abate, and corporate campaigns will still be necessary, particularly to win contracts that cover large numbers of workers. As more American businesses become part of global conglomerates, more global union alliances will be necessary, too.

But Acuff sees two kinds of changes coming if EFCA is passed. "First," he says, "more unions will feel an incentive to organize knowing they can win. They'll invest more in organizing. It will be a quicker process, and we'll begin to grow in the growing sectors of the economy that are largely unorganized today."

"Second," he says, "there will be a level of worker self-organizing that we haven't seen in generations. I don't think unions will be targeting workers at small establishments: It doesn't make sense to organize a 12-person hardware store when there's a 400-person department store down the street. But in places where there's significant worker anger, the workers will feel freer to circulate a petition or to ask a union for a stack of cards and then go to the union and say, we want you to represent us. It may not lead to a significant increase in the number of new workers who get organized, but it will lead to a significant increase in the number of establishments where new workers get organized."

What EFCA will do, in other words, is create more opportunity for large-scale organizing, which will continue to rely on corporate campaigns. But it will increase the opportunities for mom-and-pop worksite organizing as well. For both the American economy and American democracy, that should come as very welcome news. **TAP**

AFTER KATRINA: REDEMPTION & REBUILDING

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Not by Accident

Building a sustainable New Orleans

BY MARK DAVIS

New Orleans was built in a place that is both insane and inevitable. The culture of the City and the region is both parochial and cosmopolitan. The swamps and marshes that define the region’s landscape seem timeless—even primordial—yet are mere thousands of years old and incredibly dynamic, geologically and hydrologically. New Orleans can be simultaneously inspiring, romantic, and frightening. No wonder virtual cottage industries of defenders and critics of the city and its future

have emerged with such passion and numbers in the years since Hurricane Katrina roared across the landscape in August of 2005. In the bipolar world of post-Katrina New Orleans, I have found myself in both camps—sometimes on the same day—but I keep coming back to one fact: New Orleans was not an accident. It was not founded by mistake. It did not grow to be a great city by happenstance. It was not ruined by random forces.

That simple fact, the city’s un-accidental nature, is what makes New Orleans important. It goes to the heart of why the struggles of New Orleans to survive and thrive matter. Just as New Orleans’ past was not an accident, its future won’t be accidental, either. Good or bad, it will be shaped by policies, decisions, and the appetite of its residents and this nation to accept hard truths and make meaningful commitments. These are the same issues the entire nation will increasingly face as we deal with rising seas, growing freshwater scarcity, and questions of who benefits and who suffers from climate change. If we can’t figure out how to make New Orleans sustainable and resilient, it will be hard to imagine good things for other vulnerable places like Miami, Houston, and the New Jersey Shore. If we can’t rebalance

human development with the stewardship of water, wetlands, and other natural resources in New Orleans, it won’t portend well for the Everglades, Chesapeake Bay, Great Lakes, and water-strapped cities like Las Vegas and Atlanta.

New Orleans did not just happen. America is filled with seemingly accidental cities—towns that grew around a mine, rail junction, factory, or as the result of some random upheaval. New Orleans is not that kind of town. Like London, Venice, Amsterdam, Rotterdam, and Tokyo, it was founded in a challenging but essential place. Its proximity to the Gulf of Mexico and the Mississippi River combined with its modest but vital elevation (it was not below sea level then, though much of it is today) make New Orleans, as geographer Peirce Lewis has called it, an “impossible but inevitable city.”

Its founders grasped the challenges and commercial advantages of building a city on a coastal swamp. New Orleans was not a daring experiment but rather one in a series of great cities founded and built in coastal plains and deltas. Or, as Jesuit historian Pierre François-Xavier de Charlevoix, an early chronicler of the French settlement, wrote in 1721: “On the banks of a navigable river, [near] the sea, from which a vessel can come up in twenty-four hours; on the fertility of its soil; ... on its neighbourhood to Mexico, [to] Havana ... can there be any thing more requisite to render a city flourishing?”

The devastation from Katrina and Rita did not just happen. For much of its his-

tory, the match between New Orleans and nature was fairly, if grudgingly, balanced. The city grew and prospered, and the attendant risks were managed through its infrastructure, architecture, and grit. Without the benefit of federal flood protection or flood insurance, the city grew to greatness, its population reaching its zenith of nearly 650,000 in the early 1960s.

The balance began to shift in the early 20th century as efforts to drain wetlands (under the Orwellian banner of “reclamation”), manage river flows, and expand navigation took firm hold. Massive levees and drainage projects began to alter the landscape and seeded the vast coastal collapse that contributed to Katrina’s devastating impact—complicating the plans for building a resilient city going forward. The vast alluvial plain that makes up most of the lower third of Louisiana went from relative equilibrium in 1900 to a net loss of over 1.2 million acres (and counting) of coastal wetlands since the 1930s. This was not wetlands merely being converted to dry land but land made vulnerable to open water.

These changes were driven in large part by government projects intended to spur economic development and provide flood protection. Many of the risks were known. In 1928, Percy Viosca Jr., a scientist working for the state of Louisiana wrote, “Reclamation and flood control as practiced in Louisiana have been more or less a failure, destroying valuable natural resources without producing the permanent compensating benefits originally



A Walled Community: The newly constructed levee, and beyond it foundations of destroyed homes in the Lower 9th Ward, August 2008

desired.” Ironically, Viosca wrote this in the same year Congress enacted the Flood Control Act of 1928, which put the United States Army Corps of Engineers into the levee-building business for the first time and absolved them of liability for any consequences. As a result, the natural buffers that surround New Orleans began melting away.

For New Orleans itself, things changed dramatically when Hurricane Betsy hit in 1965. The flooding in some neighborhoods was much like that during Katrina, but the response could not have been more different. America had a larger appetite for public works back then. President Lyndon Johnson quickly enlisted Congress to pass a hurricane-protection system to guard the New Orleans area against the worst likely storm—a once-in-a-200-to-300-year event.

But the government settled for far less. The system that was actually built—and that ultimately failed—was the product of political and budgeting compromises, the failure to adapt to changing conditions and knowledge, and human error. The promises of storm levees and flood walls, combined with the risk-shifting aspects of the National Flood Insurance Program, led to changes in expectations and behavior. Low-lying areas were drained and developed, homes were built on slabs instead

of being elevated, and less-water-resistant building materials were employed. The roles of natural defenses and individual and local responsibility were significantly downplayed, if not lost all together. After all, this was America, and we knew how to best nature. Perversely, the massive expenditure produced a city with more apparent protection, and less resilience. The net effect was a city at higher risk.

Decades of work and millions of taxpayer dollars actually exacerbated risk. And we must now face the fact that the tens of billions of dollars that have been committed to patching the failed system and rebuilding the devastated communities since Katrina could have the same effect—if important changes aren’t made in the way protection, resilience, and community vitality are approached.

A sustainable, resilient New Orleans won’t just happen. New Orleans and much of the surrounding coastal region are incredibly vulnerable and currently unsustainable. Yet it is possible to significantly reduce that vulnerability and re-establish some worthwhile version of sustainability. This is true even in the face of rising seas, a collapsing coast, and the demonstrated failure of markets and government to get things right. But putting things right won’t come from just building higher flood walls and levees. It won’t

come from just assigning blame for the failed levees and the disappearing wetlands. And it won’t come from just the astounding energy and dedication of the people who and organizations that have come or returned to the Gulf Coast to forge a new future. We will revitalize the Louisiana Gulf Coast and encourage its displaced residents to return and stay—only if more confidence can be generated in the safety of the community. There are three essential elements of that security:

- Honest, effective, and purposeful storm protection.
- The conservation and restoration of coastal wetlands and barrier shorelines.
- Communities with the capacity to constructively engage in the planning and programs that affect their protection and well-being.

All of these things are interrelated, essential, and possible. And none of them exists in any adequate way today. Good projects, programs, and public accountability don’t happen automatically or even because there is a consensus in favor of them. They are creatures—or victims—of laws and policies that shape public decision-making. The planning, authorizing, budgeting, and funding process are all distinct and for the most part not currently tailored to the kinds of actions that the recovery and revitalization of New

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Orleans and the Gulf Coast will depend on.

Levees, pumps, gates, and wetlands are all essential elements to making New Orleans and its surrounding area a safe place to live. But how much and what kind of each of those things do we need, and what does “safe” really mean? Amazingly, those questions not only have not been answered, they really haven’t been asked.

The degree of risk to New Orleans and to any vulnerable city is a function of two things: the consequences to human health and safety if the system were to fail and the probability of failure. The pace and extent of recovery for the region will depend in part on how well those risks are assessed and understood. No risk assessment was ever done on the New Orleans levee system prior to Katrina. It was impossible for people to actually know the level of risk with which they were living. Working, living, and investing here, as elsewhere, had become an act of custom and faith more than informed judgment. If New Orleans’

was. This embarrassingly low threshold, met largely with existing pumps, levees, and flood walls, is pegged to the minimal requirements to qualify for coverage by the National Flood Insurance Program. By comparison, the Netherlands plans for one-in-1,000-year to one-in-10,000-year risk horizons.

Second, it is time to get real about just how protected levees and pumps built by the Army Corps of Engineers and others can make us, and how soon. We can’t simply build the Great Wall of New Orleans. There is not enough time, dirt, or money available, and the environmental and societal consequences from the impacts and displacement caused by the structures would, echoing Viosca’s observation in 1928, be greater than the benefits. But we can have better protection and greater resilience for those times when water and trouble arrive—and they will—if our levees and flood walls are stronger and more reliable (not necessarily bigger) and the com-

ing chance. Efforts to restore the coast have been underway for nearly 20 years. It has been noble work but more notable for what it has not achieved than what it has. This is not because we lack the knowledge and technology to do the job. Rather, it is because saving this place hasn’t really been made anyone’s job. It is someone’s job to keep rivers deep and navigable. It is someone’s job to tame and dominate water in the name of flood control and development. And it is someone’s job to harvest the fish, game, oil, and gas that can be found in coastal Louisiana. Those jobs came first, and they don’t go away just because we now want to do something new or do things differently. But until the whole range of those projects, programs, and activities are revisited and reconciled with the efforts to create a coast and communities that are sustainable and resilient, it is doubtful that any of the other efforts to rebuild, revitalize, and protect New Orleans will come to much.

New Orleans once again has become what it was to the French and British, to President Thomas Jefferson and President Abraham Lincoln—an essential city. The reasons, to be sure, are different, but it is essential nonetheless, because this is the proving ground for the American ideal of progress, equity, and reinvention. Can we honor our past without being prisoners of it? Can we muster the will and policies to apply the best of what we know to build safer, more resilient, efficient, and just communities? Can we forge a new bargain with nature rooted sufficiently in knowledge, respect, and humility to give phrases like “sustainable development” and “sustainable communities” real meaning? The future of New Orleans will depend on the answers to those questions, and the future of this country and many of its communities will depend on the answers to the questions raised in New Orleans. The right answers and actions won’t come about by accident. **TAP**

Mark Davis is a senior research fellow at Tulane University Law School. He also is the director of the Tulane Institute on Water Resources Law and Policy. He lives in New Orleans.

New Orleans is the proving ground for the American ideal of progress and reinvention. Can we forge a new bargain with nature?

levees had been built to the same standard of safety as federal law requires dams to be built, the odds of a failure resulting in the deaths of 1,000 people would be one such tragedy per 100,000 years. The levees of New Orleans were so under-designed and poorly maintained that their failure resulted in more than 1,000 deaths after only 40 years. Reclamation and flood control as practiced in Louisiana and now by the federal government remain a failure.

Yet, barring a direct hit by another Katrina in the next 30 to 50 years (an actuarially unlikely event) real progress can be made. But it has to begin now, and it has to begin with three things.

First, there needs to be an aggressive but realistic determination of just how safe and resilient New Orleans and other communities can and want to be as well as of the policies that are required. The current standard calls for New Orleans to be protected only against a one-in-100-year event, well below what Katrina

communities behind them are built smarter. Indeed, over the next 20 or so years, any appreciable improvement in protection and resilience will have to come from smarter building and land-use practices. A foot of water in a house on a slab is a disaster. A foot of water under a house raised 2 feet is an inconvenience. If that same house is in a neighborhood with natural sumps, modern cisterns and runoff controls, and well-protected utility infrastructure, it is just another bad-weather day.

Finally, it is essential to get serious about rising seas and the collapse of Louisiana’s coast. There is no quick way to restore the million-plus acres of coastal lands that have already disappeared. Like engineered storm protection, this will take time and lots of money. It will also require a new and committed approach to managing wetlands, private property, and America’s greatest river, the Mississippi. This must begin soon in earnest—if New Orleans is to have a fight-

The New Normal

Governments at all levels responded slowly to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. The people of the Gulf Coast took up the slack but haven’t absolved government of its responsibilities.

BY BRENTIN MOCK

Walking along the Algiers levees facing downtown New Orleans, Malik Rahim stops at a huge dent in the pavement that he thinks came from a crashed barge during Hurricane Katrina.

“See there,” points out Rahim, a Black Panther with grayed locks who has been a community activist since the 1970s. “That’s not going to hold water back if we have another major storm.” Rahim, a founder of Common Ground Relief, a collective of volunteers formed after Katrina to revitalize New Orleans, sees the levee damage as an opportunity to put local people to work on repairs. People from the neighborhood come regularly to Rahim’s house, which is less than a mile away. All of them are African Americans looking for work, which Rahim seems to have readily available in the form of gutting and rehabbing abandoned houses. Common Ground has relied purely on donations and foundation grants and has accepted no money from the government.

“Look at these guys,” Rahim says. “You don’t see one of them drinking or doing drugs. But they all got one thing in common: They’re unemployed.”

Many of the hundreds of community- and faith-based organizations that have opened since Katrina have, in fact, done so without significant government help. Instead, throughout the Gulf Coast region, philanthropies and corporate and individual charities have supplied funding and resources.

Call it the “think hopefully, act locally” model. These groups have restored and provided supportive, affordable housing while the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) fumbles funding for these needs. The new organizations also have provided specialized help for the



Broken Ground: “That’s not going to hold water back if we have another storm,” says Malik Rahim.

homeless, those with special needs, and the burgeoning Asian and Hispanic populations. Many have also taken up work that’s outside their normal mission, like wetlands and coastal restoration. Philanthropy has enabled them to do that.

The New York Regional Association of Grantmakers reports that 145 philanthropies from New York alone awarded over \$325 million to 950 nonprofits in 38 states that are doing Gulf Coast recovery work. Of those, 612 are based in Gulf Coast cities. Foundations have made their rules more flexible in order to provide more relief and resources as Congress and insurance companies remain slow with assistance.

The new flow of private resources, of course, is dwarfed by the public money—but the federal funds were released initially with no deliberate speed. As of Feb. 29 last year, of the \$6.6 billion FEMA allocated to Louisiana for infrastructure, Orleans Parish had received less than \$800 million, which was about 35 percent of the \$2.1 billion targeted for them.

New advocacy and philanthropic activism have filled funding gaps while trying to hold government more accountable.

Before Katrina, FEMA or the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers would call a compromised levee adequate, and there would be enough despondency in the communities to suppress second-guessing. Now, such a determination isn’t made without community members asking questions, seeking alternative expert opinions, and using tools from their community organizations to declare for themselves what is adequate. This is what’s been referred to along the Gulf Coast as “the new normal.”

RECOVERY HAS BEEN a sore issue for much of the Gulf Coast: In Mobile County, whole neighborhoods remain pummeled while \$24 million of Alabama’s Katrina recovery Community Development Block Grant funds will go toward building a sewage plant. The \$10 million initially awarded for housing covered only 200 of over 1,000 houses needing work. In Gulfport, \$600 million of the money from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) that was supposed to go toward rebuilding houses in Mississippi has been redirected by Gov. Haley Barbour for an expansion of the Port of Gulfport.

However, in New Orleans, recovery has been a better study in democracy. The money has been slow to arrive, but civic engagement has helped produce real benefits for communities—as determined by them.

Mayor Ray Nagin of New Orleans accommodated this engagement mostly due to political necessity. To get re-elected in 2006 he needed residents’ support. On Sept. 30, 2005, he announced the Bring New Orleans Back Commission (BNOB), which worked with residents (including

BRENTIN MOCK

the displaced) to develop a master recovery plan. The city needed this neighborhood manpower since its own staff and resources were being depleted—less than a week later, Nagin was announcing 3,000 layoffs due to unfulfilled requests to the state and federal government for funds.

On Jan. 11, 2006, Nagin unveiled reports from BNOB's urban planning committee all urging massive citizen involvement. On Jan. 17, the commission presented a working plan toward recovery, which divided the city into 13 neighborhood planning districts, each of which were to submit its own recommendations by May. Meanwhile, President George W. Bush created the Office of the Federal Coordinator for Gulf Coast Rebuilding with about \$66 billion in working capital from Congress.

The state's Louisiana Recovery Authority (LRA) handled allocation and disbursement of those funds, most of which went to insurance payments and short-term

try for allowing thousands of everyday citizens citywide to supply tremendous input through public meetings and votes on the city's future.

In December, Edward Blakely, a veteran planner of major urban-recovery projects, was announced as the "recovery czar" for New Orleans, but arrived stirring controversy. In April 2007, he was quoted in *The New York Times* referring to New Orleans residents as "buffoons." He also boasted he would soon have cranes covering the skyline, but no such visual emerged even well after a year into his tenure.

The first clear and consistent signs of restoration came in 2008. By November, over 600 public works and infrastructure projects in New Orleans were near shovel-ready status, with many actually completed. According to a Brookings Institution report, by July 2008, money had been awarded to almost 115,000 homeowners, although the average

Roughly 50,000 houses suffered major Katrina damage, but as of March 2006, just 16,000 building permits had been issued.

emergency assistance. The LRA's Road Home program received \$2.8 billion of the funds. By the office's own admission, it erred in having overly centralized control. By November of that year, 77,000 homeowners had applied for LRA assistance, but only 28 checks had been distributed.

Concurrently, there were rampant resident complaints about house demolitions, which seemed to come randomly and unbeknownst to the owners, often with little advanced warning. The city also could not move ahead with its recovery plans until FEMA released flood-zone maps showing where rebuilding could take place.

The city was able to start moving forward, though, when it produced its Unified New Orleans Plan, bankrolled in large part by the Rockefeller Foundation, an extension and implementation of the plans that came out of the BNOB recovery plan. It was hailed as one of the largest democratic exercises in the coun-

amount issued dropped to \$58,688 from \$72,669 in July 2007. And \$411 million in Community Development Block Grant and FEMA funds were finally approved by the City Council to assist people on the ground doing the rebuilding. Much of this progress was made possible by the residents' own influence and urging.

GULF COAST GROUPS HAD been organizing and agitating the government into action before Katrina. When 2004's Hurricane Ivan exposed flaws in the city's evacuation plans, UNITY of Greater New Orleans, an advocacy group for low-income and homeless families, was in meetings with the city helping to draft contingency measures for the next big storm.

No documented plans existed then for evacuating the estimated 130,000 people without cars, in hospitals and hospices, or otherwise unable to evacuate. After a worst-case-scenario simulation was presented to Mayor Ray Nagin and his staff

in 2004—a digital Category 3 hurricane named Pam—UNITY executive director Martha Kegel proposed contracting with school boards, Greyhound, and charter companies for use of their buses during an evacuation. Nagin's staff verbally agreed. But no contracts were drafted and nothing was implemented.

When Katrina arrived, three days into the crisis Nagin couldn't even locate the keys to the Regional Transit Authority buses, as reported in Douglas Brinkley's book *The Great Deluge*. While in the upstate shelter to which she was evacuated, Kegel remembers seeing school buses filled with Plaquemines parish residents pulling up, led by the parish president Benny Rousselle. She found out later that no scripted plan was in place. "They had no contracts with the schools or anything," Kegel says. "They just did what they had to do to get out of there."

One exceptional display of leadership came from Army Lt. Gen. Russel Honoré, head of the Joint Task Force Katrina that was created when FEMA proved ineffective. He arrived in New Orleans the Thursday after Katrina struck with thousands of troops and little tolerance for nonsense. With 25,000 people cloistered in the Louisiana Superdome and another 50,000 spread around the drowned city on rooftops, Honoré came when numerous rumors were circulating about flood victims "looting," raping, and killing. Many armed soldiers from the Special Weapons And Tactics police force and the private-contracted security force Blackwater—who were supposed to be there on rescue missions—had their guns pointed at citizens.

But contrary to the lawlessness that was reported, Honoré, commanding general of the Army's 1st Division, determined the area "a zero-threat environment." He shouted at soldiers to lower their weapons and appeared as one clear reminder that the armed forces were there to protect, not police, the people.

IN THE MONTHS AFTER Katrina, recovery money came slowly, if at all. Homeowners were denied claims by insurance companies that faulted "deferred maintenance"—repairs allegedly need-

ed before the hurricanes—or that said homes suffered from wind damage, which isn't covered by flood insurance.

A Brookings Institution report published in March 2006 states that the Army Corps of Engineers still hadn't razed any severely damaged houses in New Orleans. FEMA had determined that roughly 50,000 houses suffered major damage, but as of March 2006, they had issued just 16,000 building permits. A report from the National Academy of Sciences published in September of that year states that the "emergency post-disaster period" for Katrina "appears to be longer in duration than that of any other studied disaster."

When people finally began returning home, many African American renters encountered Jim Crow-like racial discrimination. On Web sites like *katrina-housing.org* and *nolahousing.com*, postings read: "not racist, but white only," "to make things more understandable for our younger child we would like to house white children," and "we live in a redneck country here, especially in my neighborhood, and blacks are frowned on."

The Greater New Orleans Fair Housing Action Center filed an administrative complaint against the Web sites for

violating the Fair Housing Act. It was just the beginning of dozens of legal complaints that would pile up in Katrina's aftermath. The Jeremiah Group, a coalition of faith-based organizations throughout New Orleans that had been doing activism around housing since 1993, felt a surge in capacity.

"We have always been able to pull people together," says Jacqueline Jones, the Jeremiah Group's lead organizer. After Katrina "did it escalate? Yes. The numbers of active and core members have increased tremendously."

"Just before the storm, we were having huge fights with the city over affordable housing," says James Perry, executive director of the Greater New Orleans Fair Housing Action Center. "There was this huge drive about getting people who would be affected by this to show up at City Council meetings to talk about this and advocate on their own behalf."

After Katrina, "They started showing up at every meeting and workshop and were telling their elected officials what they needed and how they needed it."

This new aggressive civic participation fortified Perry and urged state legislators to finally activate the Louisiana Housing Trust Fund, which was enacted in 2003

to create housing for low- to moderate-income families. It had no money until after Katrina when Perry's army convinced the legislature to deposit \$25 million into the account. The new civic activism scored again when UNITY, after three years of campaigning, convinced Congress last summer to allocate \$73 million for 3,000 rental units from the state's Road Home program, most of which will go to the homeless and disabled.

One fight that community groups lost was the struggle to save the "big four" low-income housing projects: St. Bernard, C.J. Peete, Lafitte, and B.W. Cooper. Of these, only Lafitte will get one-for-one replacements of the razed units. In St. Bernard, 466 units will replace the 1,300 that existed before it. However, Jim Kelly, a major developer on the Lafitte project, said in a *Times-Picayune* article that it was the citizens who deserved the credit.

"Now, you can't keep residents from getting in front of microphones and arguing better than or as good as any lawyer I know," says Tracie Washington, who formed the Louisiana Justice Institute after Katrina and labored to keep the housing projects open. "They've learned how to fight for themselves."



A Lengthy "Post-Disaster": Girls walk past abandoned homes on a lightly populated street in the Central City area of New Orleans on Jan. 18, 2007.

LEE CELANO / THE NEW YORK TIMES / REDUX

IT WAS ONE THING THAT so many community-based organizations were forming and accomplishing so much, but without synchronization they were doomed to meet the same tangled fate as the governments they were challenging. Without coordination among the groups, the threat of cluttered and scattered agendas could have added up to rivalry and stalemate. To avoid this, the new activists began coalescing.

Timolynn Sams, an AmeriCorps worker, became the director of the Neighborhood Partnership Network, which links the city's 73 neighborhoods to one another and also with the city government. The Louisiana Disaster Recovery Foundation, formed the week after Katrina, has proved an effective connector for the network and other neighborhood-based associations, as well as an intermediary for funds making their way from national foundations.

The Equity and Inclusion Campaign was conceived by the Louisiana Disaster

ation buses came. Campaign members from states not affected were in constant communication with members in Louisiana who were, ensuring they had transportation, bedding and kitchenware for the shelters, volunteers, food, and water.

In helping often-overlooked populations, the New Orleans Workers' Center for Racial Justice was instrumental in persuading Immigration and Customs Enforcement to suspend their checkpoints so that immigrants could evacuate free of fear. It was like the "lower your weapons" command of Gen. Honoré, who now serves on the Louisiana Disaster Recovery Foundation board.

"Nonprofits make a big difference in these people's lives," Honoré says. "But overall, the responsibility of storm recovery should be on the state government in collaboration with FEMA and the federal government in order to have a more active process and to try [to] do it quicker."

Perhaps lack of government respon-

supplemental funding for government.

When the city's recovery-management office needed additional staff, the Orleans Recovery Foundation provided funding for a director of disaster-mitigation planning, which was filled by Earthea Nance, a professor who took a leave of absence from Virginia Tech to volunteer in New Orleans. "I came here for the same reason someone who wants to be a star goes to Hollywood, or someone interested in politics goes to D.C.," Nance says.

If you are someone whose focus is on planning, environmental mitigation, and engineering, then going to New Orleans is "an opportunity of a lifetime," Nance adds. She now works in the recovery office updating the city's hazard-mitigation plan and synchronizing it with the city's master plan.

But while philanthropy has come to the rescue and fostered the growth of both civic and local government action, the new movement hardly absolves the federal government of its duty to help its citizens recover. Even with all that the community-based organizations have done, there are still tremendous gaps that may be beyond their capacity. Despite President Bush's claim on the *Larry King Live* show that he led a "pretty darn quick" response, there remains a stalemate between what the state and city say they need for repairs and what FEMA says it will consider for reimbursement—a \$1.4 billion gap, according to the state.

"The levees broke—that was a federal failure," Perry says. "If federal government makes a mistake, they should be held responsible for cleaning it up. They are funded and charged [with] dealing with these kinds of issues, and they have a certain guarantee of funding and ability to do that. But with us and volunteers, there is no guarantee we will be able to continue to respond like this."

However, just the fact that Gulf Coast organizations have been able to respond, especially as the wounded themselves, is the triumph of a region that's been written off as poor, colored, and likely not worth saving. Says Nance, "A major part of this recovery has been the recovery of civil society." **TAP**

If one's focus is on planning, environmental mitigation, and engineering, then going to New Orleans is an opportunity of a lifetime.

Recovery Foundation and formed in June 2007 to see if the swiftly growing accumulation of nonprofits across the Gulf Coast could collaborate and approach Congress as one regional dependent, rather than as a pack of siblings. With regional equity as the guiding principle, organizations from Mississippi and Alabama could finally get the attention they deserved when sold as a package with Louisiana.

When Gustav and Ike hit the Gulf during the 2008 hurricane season, they tested the resolves of not only the Equity and Inclusion Campaign coalition members but also those of the local and federal governments. Mostly, they passed. UNITY, a member of the campaign, worked with the city's Office of Emergency Preparedness for the City Assisted Evacuation Plan. UNITY's staff was in the streets helping police evacuate the homeless and people of special needs and making sure they got to the front of the line when the evacu-

sibility was the reason Gustav was not a total success. While many agree things went well, there were reports of poor, if not inhumane treatment of those sheltered after the evacuation. The sheltering was the responsibility of the state's Department of Social Services. The department's director, Ann Williamson, resigned after Gustav with apologies. In the old normal, having just this one flaw, however major, in a disaster would probably have been good enough. However, Martha Kegel is already working with the state to ensure that next time, the sheltering runs better.

THE FUNDING FOR MUCH of this new civic engagement came from major foundations such as Ford, Kellogg, McKnight, Annie E. Casey, Gates, and Blue Moon, with much of it funneled through the Louisiana Disaster Recovery Foundation, the Greater New Orleans Foundation, and the Orleans Recovery Foundation. They've even provided

The Color of Toxic Debris

The racial injustice in the flow of poison that followed the flood

BY ROBERT D. BULLARD AND BEVERLY WRIGHT

Well before Hurricane Katrina struck on Aug. 29, 2005, New Orleans was already struggling with a wide range of environmental-justice challenges. People of color tended to be most vulnerable to a range of environmental assaults, from flood waters to toxic debris. Beyond being exposed to hurricanes, residing along the Mississippi River Chemical Corridor has increased the vulnerability of local residents to environmental-health threats. The corridor has often been dubbed "Cancer Alley," and in 2008, Louisiana replaced Mississippi as the unhealthiest U.S. state, according to the annual ranking released by the foundation, American Public Health Association, and the Partnership for Prevention advocacy group.

Katrina was among the costliest, deadliest, and most devastating disasters in U.S. history. While public attention has focused on the politics of rebuilding the Gulf Coast, a lesser known crisis of debris lingers on. A September 2005 *Business Week* commentary described the handling of the untold tons of "lethal goop" left over from hurricane damage as the "mother of all toxic cleanups."

Hurricane Katrina left debris across a 90,000-square-mile disaster area in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. In comparison, the attacks of September 11, 2001, left a 16-acre tract of debris in New York City. According to the Congressional Research Service, Katrina generated more than 100 million cubic yards of debris, compared to the 2.8 million cubic yards generated after the terrorist attacks on New York City.

Weeks after Katrina struck, the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality (LDEQ) allowed New Orleans to open the 200-acre Old Gentilly Landfill to dump the storm's leftovers. The unlined dump was a well-documented health haz-

ard that federal regulators had ordered closed in the 1980s. But by December 2005, the dump was open again, and every day, more than 2,000 truckloads of hurricane debris entered the landfill located at 10200 Almonaster Ave. in mostly African American east New Orleans.

In April 2006, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the LDEQ issued permits for yet another landfill in New Orleans East on Chef Menteur Highway. This new landfill was about four miles west of the Old Gentilly Landfill in a mostly African American and Vietnamese community. After intense political pressure, in July 2006, Mayor Ray Nagin ordered the controversial landfill on Chef Menteur Highway closed. Hundreds of trucks each day dump their loads into New Orleans' largest and busiest landfill, the Old Gentilly Landfill, according to PBS reporter Betty Ann Bowser. And New Orleans East continues to be the city's dumping grounds—with more than 23 illegal dumps.

LIVING ON POISONED LAND

Using black neighborhoods as toxic dumping grounds is an old story in New Orleans. After Hurricane Betsy struck in 1965, debris was trucked to the Agriculture Street Landfill. Two mostly black New Orleans subdivisions, Gordon Plaza and Press Park, and the Moton Elementary School were subsequently built on a portion of the old landfill. The soil was so toxic that in 1994, the Environmental Protection Agency declared the Agriculture Street Landfill a Superfund site, indicating a serious health hazard in need of costly remediation. A \$20 million government cleanup was completed in 2001, even though buying out residents at fair market value would have cost only \$14 million.

In 1993, challenging the EPA's cleanup plans, the Concerned Citizens of Agricul-



Left Behind: A family picks up trash in the Lower 9th Ward in August 2006, the same month the EPA gave New Orleans a clean bill of health.

ture Street Landfill filed a class-action lawsuit against the city of New Orleans for damages and cost of relocation. The case was still pending when Hurricane Katrina struck. In January 2006, Civil District Court Judge Nadine Ramsey ruled in favor of the residents, declaring the neighborhood "unreasonably dangerous" and "uninhabitable." Judge Ramsey ordered the Housing Authority of New Orleans, the city, and the insurers to pay fair-market value of residents' homes, plus \$4,000 to \$50,000 for emotional distress. The ruling was appealed, and in January 2008, after nearly 15 years of litigation, the Louisiana Supreme Court largely upheld Judge Ramsey's ruling but cut the emotional-distress awards in half.

DIRT POOR

In March 2006, seven months after Katrina slammed ashore, organizers of "A Safe Way Back Home" initiative, the Deep South Center for Environmental Justice at Dillard University, and the United Steel Workers, undertook a proactive pilot neighborhood-cleanup project—the first of its kind in New Orleans. Inde-

LEE CELANO / REUTERS / LANDOV



2,000 Trucks A Day: Old Gentilly Landfill, New Orleans' largest dump, was reopened in 2005 after being closed in the 1980s as a health hazard.

pendent tests in more than 200 sites in the city found elevated lead and arsenic levels exceeding federal safety standards. The pilot project spurred similar clean-up projects in more than two-dozen New Orleans neighborhoods.

State and federal officials labeled the voluntary cleanup efforts as “scaremongering” and “completely unnecessary.” Ironically, although the EPA refused to promote or support neighborhood clean-ups after the storm, it gave the Deep South Center for Environmental Justice the 2008 Environmental Justice Achievement Award for “its work to help residents in New Orleans, Louisiana, address environmental contamination and return home after the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina in 2005.”

Although many government scientists insisted New Orleans' soil was safe, an April 2006 multi-agency taskforce press release distributed by the EPA raised serious doubt. Government officials cautioned residents to “keep children from playing in bare dirt.” They also advised residents to “cover bare dirt with grass, bushes or 4-6 inches of lead-free wood chips, mulch, soil or sand.”

Churchill Downs, the owner of New Orleans' Fair Grounds, felt the soil was not safe and ordered a \$16 million cleanup for its thoroughbred horses. The owners hauled off soil tainted by Katrina's floodwaters and rebuilt a grandstand roof that had been ripped off by the storm's wind.

On Thanksgiving Day 2006, horse racing returned to New Orleans. The horses got better treatment than many humans.

In March 2007, the Natural Resources Defense Council soil sampling found nearly 25 percent of the 35 New Orleans playgrounds and schoolyards tested may be classified as arsenic “hot spots.” These findings contradicted Washington's repeated assurances that all was well.

In August 2006, a year after the storm, the EPA gave New Orleans a clean bill of health. “The hurricane didn't cause any appreciable contamination that wasn't already there,” said EPA toxicologist Jon Rauscher. But in June 2007, a Government Accountability Office report criticized the EPA's handling of contamination in post-Katrina New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. The GAO found inadequate monitoring for asbestos around demolition and renovation sites. Additionally, the GAO investigation uncovered that key information released to the public about environmental contamination was neither timely nor adequate and in some cases, easily misinterpreted to the public's detriment.

LIVING AND DYING IN TOXIC TRAILERS

Many of the residents displaced by Katrina were placed in temporary housing, including 120,000 travel trailers purchased by the Federal Emergency Management Agency for \$2.6 billion. More than 140,000 families were housed in FEMA travel trailers and mobile homes

across the Gulf Coast. The Sierra Club found unsafe levels of formaldehyde in 30 of 32 travel trailers it tested in 2006. Even though FEMA received numerous complaints about toxic trailers, the agency initially only tested one occupied trailer to determine the levels of formaldehyde in it. The monitored levels were 75 times higher than what the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health recommend for adult exposure in industrial workplaces.

FEMA deliberately neglected to investigate any reports of high levels of formaldehyde in trailers so as to bolster its litigation position just in case individuals harmed by FEMA's negligence decided to sue them. Residents continued to get sick while several government agencies, FEMA, the EPA, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, dragged their feet, failed to conduct a health study, or take appropriate actions to protect the health of the residents living in trailers. The CDC, traditionally a professional and independent agency, needed funding for its study from FEMA and approval from the Office of Management and Budget. CDC's testing began only in December 2007.

In August 2007, frustrated with government inaction, more than 500 hurricane survivors and evacuees in Louisiana filed legal action against the trailer manufacturers for exposing them to the toxic chemical formaldehyde. In December

2008, storm victims from Louisiana, Mississippi, Texas, and Alabama filed a class-action lawsuit (though ultimately denied class-action status) over the FEMA trailer fumes. In the meantime, FEMA is still spending \$28 million annually to store travel trailers and mobile homes at five Mississippi sites while the agency determines whether they'll be reused or sold as scrap.

In February 2008, more than two years after residents of FEMA trailers first complained of breathing difficulties, nosebleeds, and persistent headaches (and after the EPA gave New Orleans a clean bill of health), CDC tests found that average levels of formaldehyde gas in 519 trailers and mobile homes tested in Louisiana and Mississippi were about five times normal levels in most modern homes. In some trailers, levels were nearly 40 times customary exposure levels—levels that could have long-term negative health effects.

Katrina generated more than 100 million cubic yards of debris, compared to the 2.8 million cubic yards in New York post-9/11.

CDC tests showed an average formaldehyde level of 77 parts per billion, with a low of 3 parts per billion and a high of 590 parts per billion. The average level in new homes is 10 to 20 parts per billion. Formaldehyde is a known carcinogen, and long-term exposure to levels of 77 parts per billion could have serious effects. Even this long-awaited CDC study was “marred by ... flaws,” according to the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. CDC scientists who conducted the study used an unusually high threshold of hazard to evaluate the formaldehyde in the trailers: Instead of 30 parts per billion, they used 300 parts per billion, 10 times greater than the long-term standard.

The usual CDC standard says that people exposed to as little as 30 parts of formaldehyde per billion parts of air for more than two weeks can suffer constricted airways, headaches, and rashes. Almost all of the trailers measured above that level. In November 2008, there were

still 9,300 families in trailers and 1,600 in hotel rooms across the Gulf Coast.

A November 2008 study from the New York-based children's health fund, Legacy of Shame, found that children in a federally funded FEMA Baton Rouge trailer park have serious health problems. It found that 41 percent of children younger than 4 were diagnosed with iron-deficiency anemia, more than double the rate of children living in New York City homeless shelters; 55 percent of elementary-school-age children had a behavior or learning problem; 42 percent of children were diagnosed with allergic rhinitis, known as hay fever, and/or upper respiratory infection; and 24 percent had a cluster of allergies and upper respiratory and skin ailments.

Even before the storm, these were some of the nation's neediest children and represented some of the sickest of the estimated 30,000 children living in trailers and temporary housing in the region.

UNEQUAL FLOOD PROTECTION

The racially charged patterns of suffering after Katrina mirror the disparity in what the government is doing to mitigate damage from the next Katrina. The Army Corps of Engineers is working to fix 350 miles of levees and floodwalls (220 miles of which have already been repaired); build new flood gates and pump stations at the mouths of three outfall canals; and strengthen existing walls and levees at important points. By May 2008, the Army Corps had spent \$4 billion of the \$14 billion set aside by Congress to repair and upgrade the metropolitan area's levees by 2011. After spending more than \$22 million on repairs, the 17th Street levee, the one that broke with catastrophic effect during Hurricane Katrina, leaked again in May 2008. Some outside experts say billions more could be needed and that some of the work already completed may need to be redone.

After spending billions of dollars on levee repairs, a disproportionately large swath of black New Orleans is still left vulnerable to future flooding. The vast New Orleans East area, which makes up about 60 percent of New Orleans land area and some 40 percent of the tax base before the storm, has had no real increase in levee protection.

Increased levee protection maps closely with the race of neighborhoods, with black neighborhoods such as the 9th Ward, Gentilly, and New Orleans East receiving little if any increased flood protection. These disparities, in turn, could lead insurers and investors to redline and think twice about supporting the rebuilding efforts in vulnerable black areas. For example, the mostly black Upper 9th Ward can expect to receive just 6 inches of increased flood protection compared to 5 and a half feet of increased flood protection in the city's mostly white and affluent Lakeview area.

The government response to environmental threats in post-Katrina New Orleans can best be described as a dismal failure. The “mother of all toxic clean-ups” was all rhetoric. A racial divide still exists in the way government responds to toxic contamination, flooding, and public-health threats to blacks and Vietnamese residents. Not only were communities of color differentially affected by post-Katrina environmental threats, they still get different and unequal treatment from the government in planning for the future. Predominantly white communities have seen faster action and better results on all fronts. It is the responsibility of the government to protect all Katrina survivors, not just those who can afford lawyers and experts or those who can “vote with their feet” and exit contaminated and flood-prone neighborhoods. **TAP**

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TONY DEJAK / AP IMAGES

New Leadership, New Hopes

How much difference will the Obama Administration make to the recovery of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast?

BY TIM FERNHOLZ

When Barack Obama arrived in Washington four years ago as a freshman senator, his first goal was a low profile. Hoping to dampen the high expectations he earned during his address at the Democratic National Convention, Obama cultivated friendships with other senators and developed his expertise on national affairs. One such partnership was with Sen. Tom Coburn, a conservative from Oklahoma, to remedy the failed federal response to Hurricane Katrina. Obama visited New Orleans to criticize the Bush administration's emergency management and demanded better oversight of reconstruction funds.

Now, President Obama finds himself in charge of the same agencies that mismanaged the devastating effects of Hurricane Katrina: the Department of Homeland Security, and, principally, the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Though failures occurred on the state and local levels as well, those mistakes were compounded by FEMA's failure, as the principal disaster-response coordinator, to work quickly and effectively before, during, and after the hurricane struck.

The question of how to reconfigure federal disaster policy remains an open one. The answers have less to do with another bureaucratic reorganization and more to do with disaster prevention and even policy developments far from traditional disaster-management approaches.

Which isn't to say that reorganization hasn't been tried. In the three short years since the head of FEMA during Katrina, Michael Brown, left Washington in disgrace, his successor, R. David Paulison, has had four different titles during a series of organizational-chart shakeups. The most recent changes were implemented in 2006, when the Demo-

crats regained congressional majorities after riding a political wave based partially upon national anger at the Katrina response. They passed omnibus FEMA reform legislation that incorporated suggestions from a select committee that investigated the disaster. The changes have been mostly well received.

According to Rep. Bennie G. Thompson, a Democrat from Mississippi and chairman of the Committee on Homeland Security, "Since the Post-Katrina Reform Act, FEMA has done a better job responding and preparing for emergencies by working with state and local officials." The reforms, which pointedly included a requirement that the FEMA administrator be qualified for the job, brought several agencies under FEMA's umbrella and authorized new initiatives to improve disaster planning and communications. It also clarified the command hierarchy from the FEMA administrator to the homeland security secretary and the president, making the administrator the president's principal adviser on emergency-response issues. Following these efforts, the agency's actions during more recent disasters, including wildfires in California, flooding in Iowa, and Hurricanes Ike and Gustav, have been more competent.

But problems remain. Since Katrina, it's become almost a cliché to stress increased focus on pre-disaster planning and preparing rather than just response and recovery efforts. Drew Sachs worked as a FEMA official during the Clinton administration and followed his boss, the widely admired then-FEMA Director James Lee Witt, into a private consulting firm involved with the Katrina response and reconstruction efforts in Louisiana. Sachs said that the new administration needs to focus on broad-based catastrophic-

planning efforts that could be scaled down to respond to smaller disasters, and to specifically return to a focus on preparing communities for disasters. "The focus of emergency management needs to be on hazard mitigation," Sachs said. "The reality is if you're responding to an event and helping with recoveries, in some ways, you could argue, you've already failed." One example is the Hazard Mitigation Grant program, which allows FEMA to help local authorities identify threatened areas, promote flood-control programs that include retrofitting levees, modify infrastructure to be more disaster-resilient, and, in the wake of a catastrophe, purchase properties affected by natural disasters to prevent future loss.

An unfortunate legacy of September 11 is a skewing of national priorities and resources. When FEMA was folded into the new Department of Homeland Security after 9-11, its priorities shifted from natural hazard mitigation toward worries about terrorism and weapons of mass destruction. While that kind of planning remains essential, other areas under the agency's watch—particularly natural disasters—suffered from a lack of resources. Of the 15 scenarios that FEMA asks state and local agencies to prepare for, only two are natural hazards.

Retired Lt. Gen. Russell Honoré concurs with Sachs' focus on mitigation. Honoré, a veteran soldier who held commands in Europe and South Korea, was deployed as the military commander of the Hurricane Katrina response force after FEMA's failures became apparent. "For every dollar you spend in preparedness, you can save \$9 in response and recovery," he observed.

In his post-military life, Honoré has made his goal encouraging a "culture of preparedness." Now working with a reconstruction nonprofit, The Louisiana Disaster Recovery Foundation, he promotes basic ideas about preparedness that don't excite but that could save lives. These include policies like increasing first-aid education, using building codes to prevent emergency generators from being placed on the first floors of buildings in flood zones, and increasing insurance requirements



After The Fact: Lt. Gen. Russell Honoré surveys the extensive flood damage by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

for homes and businesses in flood zones.

"The standard I use is people are Red Cross ready," Honoré said. "Step one of the Red Cross program is you have a plan to evacuate. Step two is you've got a three-day supply of food and water stored at home, and step three is you stay informed, which means you have a weather radio. And there's lots of people along the Gulf Coast, from Florida on through Texas, who are not Red Cross ready. ... You need to include preparedness in education."

Other hopes for the new administration include a focus on better coordination between government authorities and nonprofit and private-sector participants in disaster-relief efforts. During the response to Katrina, tasks like replacing damaged cell-phone towers to provide communications for emergency responders, or reopening local businesses to supply necessities, were needlessly hindered, sometimes for days, by poor coordination between federal, state, and local officials. FEMA now has a department dedicated to preparing open lines of communication with various nongovernmental entities, but it consists only of a handful of staffers working out of the external-affairs office.

"There is progress being made; it's being made piecemeal and not holistically," Sachs said.

More attention also needs to be paid to local emergency-management authorities, who feel that FEMA hasn't been listening enough to their concerns. "You give folks at the local level the flex-

ibility to do what's important to them, within a broad strategy," said David Miller, the director of Iowa's Emergency Management Department. The Department of Homeland Security "and FEMA have sometimes forgotten that and become too directed from the top down rather than listening from the bottom up."

Every emergency-management professional I spoke to thought that FEMA would work better outside of the Homeland Security Department, whose primary mission is law enforcement and intelligence, but recognizing the

difficulties of further reorganization, most hope that Obama and his incoming homeland security secretary, Gov. Janet Napolitano of Arizona, will at least promote discussion of the issues.

Napolitano has downplayed plans to move FEMA around, telling senators during her confirmation hearing, "Where I'm going to start right now is to take the organization we have right now, as opposed to moving a lot of boxes around." Napolitano was chosen for the homeland security

A reformed FEMA's actions during recent disasters, including wildfires, floods, and hurricanes, have been more competent.

post primarily because of her executive experience and work on immigration and border security. Though she has emergency preparedness experience from her time as governor, she is not known for her expertise on those issues.

OUTSIDE OF FEMA, there are broader issues of federal policy that will affect the government's capability to respond effectively to disasters. One of the most critical is poverty and community development.

"If you have an impoverished area, you have to have a good evacuation plan because poor people may not have cars to leave with," Honoré said. "If they do have a car, they don't have a credit card to call and reserve a hotel. The majority

of the people we evacuated out of the city were poor people."

After Katrina, anti-poverty efforts briefly became a national issue as disproportionate effects of the disaster on low-income, minority residents of places like the 9th Ward in New Orleans became clear. Similarly, reports suggest that Hispanics suffered more than others did during California's wildfires. The problems in these communities include everything from limited access to vehicles and mistrust of government officials to a lack of education and information, both generally and on emergency preparedness.

During his engagement with Katrina, Obama often drew connections between the disaster and the problems of wage stagnation or Bush administration policies on cutting both taxes and Medicaid. "Government is about making choices, and the choices that we've been making in the last four years have resulted in higher poverty rates," then-Senator Obama said in 2005.

Though somewhat deterred by a crowded agenda and an economic crisis that demands an immediate response, Obama confirmed his commitment to

helping low-income Americans during his presidential campaign.

"What Katrina uncovered is what happens when a disaster hits an impoverished area and the impact of the disaster on the poor, the elderly, the disabled, and small businesses," said Honoré. "It takes a hard time to recover. The amount of time it's taking to get key decisions made appears to have taken just too long."

The White House Web site now says the new administration will take steps to rebuild the Gulf Coast and keep the old administration's "broken promises." Obama himself introduced a bill in 2005 requiring FEMA to make specific plans for groups that are disproportionately affected by disasters, focusing on low-income people, the disabled, and the elderly. Some

KEVORK DJANSEZIAN / AP IMAGES

of that effort could come out of broader cooperation with nonprofit groups who already work in those communities, even before a disaster strikes. Diana Rothe-Smith, the executive director of National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster, hopes that the future will hold broader coordination between FEMA and her member organizations, which include groups ranging from Catholic Charities USA to the Red Cross, and perhaps legislation to make it easier for the government to fund numerous efforts undertaken by those groups during a disaster.

In New Orleans and elsewhere, the struggle to combat poverty requires multiple approaches. Honoré stresses improving education, especially among minority populations; indeed, in the wake of Katrina, the city of New Orleans has launched a broad effort at K-12 school reform, and Obama has appointed a prominent education reformer, Arne Duncan, to be his secretary of education.

Honoré also recalled New Orleans in the middle of last century, when a black middle class flourished thanks to strong unions in the city's port industries. Part of Obama's plan to rebuild the middle class includes support for stronger unions. Obama has promised job creation through his stimulus legislation and plans to tweak taxes for working-class people. His administration also plans to create 20 "Promise Neighborhoods," based on the Harlem Children's Zone, which will bring intensive services to fight poverty and increase education. Expect at least one of those neighborhoods to end up on the Gulf Coast.

Obama has made clear in previous public statements that he takes the problems of disaster response and recovery seriously, but the effort to transform disaster policy is not the kind of easy fix that brings quick political points. Preparation, by its nature, is a long-term game, but the new president can witness the political consequences of the failure to think ahead from his predecessor.

"Some may be to blame, but all of us are responsible," Obama told National Public Radio in 2005. "This is something that has to be a 24/7 job and not something that we engage in after a crisis." **TAP**

Gulf Coast Notebook

Communities rebuild in the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina, Rita, and Ike.

BY CASEY SANCHEZ

THE MARY QUEEN OF VIETNAM CHURCH
The recent election of U.S. Congressman Anh Cao, a first for Vietnamese Americans, stunned many observers but not those in the pews at Mary Queen of Vietnam, a Catholic parish in New Orleans East where Cao has been a member for over a decade. Refugees began arriving in New Orleans East shortly after the end of the Vietnam War in 1975. By 2000, the district was home to most of the city's 14,000 Vietnamese Americans, one of the largest concentrated enclaves in the country. When Mary Queen was founded in 1986, it became the first U.S. Catholic church to offer mass in Vietnamese.

"We are back to the extent that we can bring forth a candidate," says Father Nguyen The Vien, 45, who has been a pastor at Mary Queen since 2003. He has lived in New Orleans since arriving as a 12-year-old refugee in 1975. During Katrina, most of New Orleans East was submerged under flood waters, leaving hundreds of parish members homeless. But New Orleans' Vietnamese community drew on its immigrant refugee experience and tightly knit church to quickly rebuild.

"All of our older members have had the experience of evacuation throughout the wars in Vietnam," Nguyen says. "We're also familiar with returning to build, the countless times we've done it throughout 21 years of war." When Katrina floodwaters dispersed parish members to Texas, Arkansas, and throughout Louisiana, laity and clergy were already in their cars, mixing consolation with organization.

"Wherever we'd go, we'd take pictures of one location and show it to the other [scattered parishioners]," said Nguyen. "Even while they were dispersed, they were in connection with one another." When Mayor Nagin officially reopened

the West Bank area on Oct. 5, 2005, Nguyen already had his community back.

The following Sunday, over 300 people attended mass, a welcome display of community for those who returned to empty blocks and storm-ravaged houses. The surrounding Versailles neighborhood became one of the first sections of New Orleans outside of the central business district to regain power, after Mary Queen, 95 percent of whose members returned after the devastation, submitted 500 petition signatures to the city requesting quick action.

Nguyen used the same red-tape-cutting skills in a January 2006 deal he struck with FEMA to lease 13 acres of church property to the agency for free in exchange for giving the displaced elderly of Mary Queen first dibs on the trailers that were installed there. When the pagoda-bedecked trailer park opened six months later, FEMA gave more than half of its 199 units to outsiders, angering Nguyen and parishioners who had pooled together \$80,000 to pay for the site's liability insurance. The church fought back by enlisting the support of Sen. Mary Landrieu and Sen. David Vitter to make FEMA live up to its contractual promises.

Shortly thereafter, Mary Queen formed its own community-development corporation (CDC). Its first major project was spearheading a multiracial campaign of churches and environmental groups to close the Chef Menteur landfill, located on wetlands just a mile from Mary Queen. Mayor Ray Nagin used an emergency order to open the storm-debris dump in April 2006 but was forced to shut it down four months later. Today, the CDC is working on turning the trailer park into a retirement home for the parish's elderly. And in July 2008, it celebrated the opening of a pediatric clinic in New Orleans

East, bringing pediatricians back to the Vietnamese immigrant enclave of Village de L'Est for the first time since Katrina. The Mary Queen CDC partnered with New Orleans' Children's hospital to build the bilingual clinic.

Today, the CDC is at work on an urban farm and a charter school, and the neighborhood continues to change in unexpected ways. The church now counts many



A Community Returns: Father Nguyen The Vien gives Sen. Hillary Clinton a tour of his church, Dec. 18, 2005.

newly arrived Latino immigrant workers among its flock, despite only offering Vietnamese-language services. "For our community, the rebuilding is done," Nguyen adds. "When you come to church, you see [2,000] or 3,000 people, you're certainly strongly encouraged, shall we say."

MARKET UMBRELLA

The farmers and shrimpers of the Louisiana Bayou were hurting long before Katrina, Rita, and Ike knocked out grocery stores and dockside icehouses. For over a decade now, Market Umbrella has worked to find local and global markets for South Louisiana's growers and fishers. Twice a week, its flagship program, the Crescent City Farmer's Market, turns a vacant lot west of the French Quarter into a foodie's paradise of homemade croissants, heirloom greens, and soft-shell crabs.

Today, the group operates with an endowment upward of \$750,000 and counts on support from such diverse sources as the Ford Foundation and *Louisiana Cookin'* magazine. Market Umbrella started out in 1995 as the Economics Institute, a Loyola University New Orleans project founded to promote "eco-

logically sound economic development." In the last three years, the organization became independent of the university, renamed itself Market Umbrella, and now trains groups throughout the country on how to create, run, and manage public markets. "In the last few years, we've developed into a much larger organization," says Emily Schweninger, the director of research for Market Umbrella. "We grew from an organization that ran farmers' markets. Now we are a national leader in mentors for markets, and we are also trying to build a rigor around the field of markets." Still, Market Umbrella's No. 1 rule for potential market operators remains "you must grow it, catch it, or make it to sell it."

A new pilot program by the United States Department of Agriculture brings nursing-home seniors to the market to play bingo and gives them extra food stamps if they purchase home-grown produce. In 2003, Market Umbrella launched "a traveling shrimpers' road show" called the White Boot Brigade, which put bayou shrimpers in parking-lot cook-offs and national TV spots in order to build boutique cachet for Louisiana wild-caught white and brown shrimp.

Lance Nacio, a third-generation bayou shrimper, credits the group for helping him market his shrimp in Whole Foods and the Williams-Sonoma Catalog. "It's allowed us to get one-on-one connection with restaurants and customers that care about what they eat," he says. But it's more than just marketing. After Katrina and Rita knocked out much of the shrimpers' infrastructure of icehouses and shipping docks, Market Umbrella inked a deal with FedEx that allows Louisiana shrimpers to box their catch and overnight it to anywhere in the U.S.

Nacio now flash freezes his daily catch, which allows him to bypass dock markets altogether. This was made possible by a grant from Market Umbrella's Go Fish program for commercial fishers transitioning into niche markets. "Now

I'm probably self-sufficient," Nacio says. "You have to do something different than sell in docks."

PEOPLE BEFORE PORTS, BILOXI, MISSISSIPPI
Mississippi, the poorest state in the country, is the only place in the U.S. where the Bush administration waived a longstanding rule that at least 70 percent of community-development funds must be spent on low-income housing. As a result, in September 2007, Gov. Haley Barbour diverted nearly \$600 million of Housing and Urban Development grants originally slated for low-income Katrina victims who owned homes to a \$1.6 billion plan to transform the state port at Gulfport into the country's largest container port. The port, known for its imports of Central American fruit, is the 17th largest in the country and takes in \$10 million annually. It suffered \$50 million in damages during Katrina.

"There are more than 18,000 families in Mississippi that have not recovered from Katrina," says Roberta Avila, head of the Mississippi Interfaith Disaster Task Force and a board member of an advocacy campaign called People Before Ports. "That's why the governor's \$600 million decision was so offensive." (That number has since been reduced to \$570 million as the state transferred more monies to low-income housing over the past year.) The governor has repeatedly said the state had already met the needs of storm-affected homeowners and emphasized that port expansion was necessary for the gulf's long-term economic health and would create 5,400 jobs by 2015. Then-HUD Secretary Alphonso Jackson signed off on the request but took the unusual step of noting his displeasure with the governor's action, stating, "This expansion does indeed divert emergency federal funding from other more pressing recovery needs, most notably affordable housing."

In response, a coalition of Mississippi religious leaders and housing advocates have come together over the past 18 months in People Before Ports, which has drawn widespread attention to the port cash swap. Having exhausted their options, four Gulf Coast residents without homes, in conjunction with the Mississippi

NAACP and the Gulf Coast Fair Housing Center, filed a lawsuit in Washington, D.C., against HUD, claiming the agency failed in its core mission to make sure that \$570 million of Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) money was spent on housing for low-income residents. “HUD’s failure to act is of tragic consequence,” the lawsuit states. “The agency’s misreading of the law allows Mississippi [to] improperly siphon off over a half-billion dollars in disaster relief funds for use on a commercial port redevelopment project when those funds are still desperately needed to provide sufficient affordable housing for Mississippi’s low-to-moderate income families.”

Some 15,000 Mississippians remain in FEMA trailers. Only 7,500 of the 47,000 rental units damaged by Katrina have been repaired. As People Before Ports notes, if just a fraction of the more than half a billion dollars in federal HUD money transferred to the port were spent on housing, it would go a long way in addressing these needs.

The lawsuit is still in its early stages, but People Before Ports has also picked up some allies in Congress after bringing residents and advocates to testify

ney in the lawsuit against HUD, told reporters, “The most basic thing is that employers aren’t able to fill jobs here now because there is not enough housing.”

CENTRAL CITY RENAISSANCE ALLIANCE

For much of the mid-20th century, Oretha Castle-Haley Boulevard in New Orleans’ Central City neighborhood was home to rollicking mixes of brass-band artists, racially mixed shopping malls, and the famous civil-rights activist for whom the street is named. As an undergraduate at Southern University in the early 1960s, Haley founded the New Orleans chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality and began organizing boycotts and sit-ins.

During the 1980s, Central City fell into a steep decline marked by violence and vacant lots. New Orleans began reinvesting in the neighborhood in the late 1990s, around the same time local rappers Juvenile and Master P. gave buzz to Central City’s vibrant hip-hop scene.

In 2005, Katrina brought a strange new attention to this slice of New Orleans between downtown offices and Garden District mansions. While nearly half of

Katrina put a crunch on affordable rental housing in Central City where only 17 percent of residents own homes.

Those two factors have renewed the interest of residents alongside those of developers. “What’s happening post-Katrina is there is greater community collaboration,” Robinson says. Colin adds that what CCRA does for Central City residents is to “make sure they’re at the table, they hold community meetings, and show this is what’s at stake, this is what the city is planning. They bring the public in to make sure they’re aware. That’s what they do; they’re kind of that bridge.”

Before the storm, CCRA was already organizing residents and neighborhood groups. Its innovation post-Katrina was to take a hodgepodge of the community’s public-housing groups, nonprofit funders, residents’ groups, and rehabbers to unite around three projects: building a community-resource center, revitalizing the commercial corridor of O.C. Haley, and redeveloping the area surrounding the neighborhood’s largest public-housing development. CCRA can now count on weekly conference status calls between the neighborhood stakeholders. The alliance has also formed a community-benefits coalition to organize residents to negotiate with the influx of developers.

The coalition has yet to work out as hoped. Over two years ago, two developers pursuing mixed-retail projects in the neighborhood met with the coalition to discuss building a community center and funding a housing-assistance grant but pulled up stakes. “It was a positive learning experience,” says Kysa Robinson, who heads CCRA and explains her group and its partners will be well positioned to negotiate with future developers.

CCRA has had better luck grabbing the ear of New Orleans city planners, having grown out of a city-sponsored community-planning process, where over 200 residents came together to share their concerns on blighted buildings the city is seeking developers to rehabilitate. “We have businesses that are interested in coming and locating in this area; what we don’t have is buildings that are ready for them,” Colin says. To address citizens’ concerns, developers have proposed more

tightly concentrated development patterns, and improved lighting and sidewalks on the district’s historic boulevard through the city’s streetscape program. Like most New Orleans neighborhoods, Central City is still missing thousands of its residents. Those who remain or who have come back have a sharper sense of civic engagement. “After the storm,

people all over the city found their voices,” Colin adds. “Everywhere was a feeling [that] if we don’t take control of our community, someone else will.” **TAP**

Casey Sanchez is a staff writer at the Intelligence Report. His articles have appeared in The Village Voice, The Stranger, and The Chicago Reporter.

The Houma Nation Digs Out

How a resilient traditional people is recovering from the latest assaults of nature and bad policy

BY DAVID HOLTHOUSE AND PRISCILLA HOLTHOUSE

Last Sept. 1, as Hurricane Gustav blasted the coastal Louisiana homeland of the United Houma Nation, tribal chief Brenda Dardar Robichaux hunkered down with friends and family members around a television with foil-wrapped bunny ears. They watched newscasters report with great relief that New Orleans had “dodged a bullet.”

Meanwhile, the winds and rains of Gustav crushed mobile homes, felled trees, sheared away roofs, flooded roads, and washed elevated wooden houses from their pilings across the isolated swamplands occupied by the 17,000 Houma (pronounced HOE-muh) roughly 50 miles southwest of New Orleans.

Twelve days later, while the Houma were still assessing the damage, Hurricane Ike flooded the region. Structures that Gustav spared were fouled with mud and mold. It was the second time in three years that a one-two combination of natural disasters rocked the Houma Nation. In August and September of 2005, Hurricanes Katrina and Rita wreaked similar devastation on the Houma’s bayou communities.

“I can’t believe this is happening again,” Robichaux said. “Even when you’re in the middle of it, addressing needs, you’re still in somewhat disbelief, two, three months after the hurricanes hit. It makes you stand back and evaluate

what is our future. Where is our future?”

The Houma would prefer to remain at the land’s edge, where they were forced to migrate centuries ago by conflicts with other tribes along with the colonial pressures of English and French settlers. The tribe’s crest became a red crawfish, symbolizing its connection to the bayous and their bounty. Before roads, the Houma traveled by pirogue—small, narrow, dug-out-style watercraft. Many Houma today are small-scale commercial fishermen, though rising costs of ice, fuel, and boat maintenance, combined with lower catch returns and prices, are making it more difficult for them to make a decent living, let alone rebuild after hurricanes.

In the past, household farming supplemented the food and income brought in by fishing. But the same forces that heightened the impact of hurricanes in recent years—coastal erosion and vanishing wetlands—have diminished the yield of the Houma’s yard-sized plots by allowing more frequent deluges.

Further complicating recovery efforts is the Houma’s lack of status with the federal government. Although they are recognized as a tribe by the state of Louisiana, speak their own dialect of Louisiana French, and have unique traditions, including a style of palmetto weaving, the use of local medicinal plants, and their annual Elders Fest, the Houma are

not recognized as a tribe by the federal government. “That means the tribe as a whole can’t apply for [Federal Emergency Management Agency] funds,” explains Robichaux. “We don’t have the status, and therefore we don’t have a government-to-government relationship. Other tribes in the state that were not as heavily impacted are receiving resources that we can’t even request for infrastructure, for recovery, for disaster preparedness, all of which we desperately need. But we don’t qualify.”

After Katrina and Rita, the Houma benefited from the army of volunteers drawn to southern Louisiana by the widespread publicity of the destruction and the Bush administration’s bungling. For months after the storms, Robichaux could look out her front window at tents sheltering hundreds of volunteers. They cleaned up debris, repaired and rebuilt homes using donated materials, and constructed an entirely new home for Miss Marie Dean, a Houma elder and talented weaver who lives alone. “It was ‘Extreme Home Makeover,’ Houma style,” says Robichaux.

Sadly, Gustav and Ike destroyed Miss Marie Dean’s new home, along with others that were fixed up after Katrina and Rita. Some of the former residents of those houses are now living in storage sheds. Others are crammed into single-family dwellings housing two to three families each. Approximately 7,000 Houma were directly affected by both the 2005 and 2008 storms. But this time around, there’s no tent city outside Robichaux’s window. The Houma chief blames the dearth of volunteers on the comparatively scant media attention the 2008 storms received once it became clear that New Orleans was out of danger. Another factor is what has been dubbed by the mainstream media as “hurricane fatigue.”

But a silver lining emerged in the storm clouds over the Houma nation: The tribe’s recovery experience following Katrina and Rita left the Houma far better prepared for Gustav and Ike. Between the sets of storms, the Houma rapidly developed their institutional capabilities by combining their time-honored survivalist resiliency with a newfound knack

Katrina revealed that half of New Orleans’ Central City district lay above the city’s floodplain. Developers quickly took note.

before the House’s Financial Services Housing and Community Opportunity Subcommittee in May. In June, a dozen congressmen, including the Financial Services Committee’s chair, Rep. Barney Frank, wrote the House’s Committee on Appropriations to block the transfer of funds to the port, stating that “to allow Mississippi to use federal CDBG dollars to advance a project that does not even receive General Funds from the State is simply unconscionable.” Back along the Gulf Coast, most People Before Ports members are quick to point out they want more jobs and economic development in their region, even port expansion—but not at the cost nor precedent of using money intended for the hurricane’s displaced survivors. Reilly Morse, an attor-

Central City sustained floodwaters as high as 8 feet, a large chunk of the neighborhood came out high and dry, revealing itself to be above the city’s infamous floodplain. Developers and city planners quickly took note. “This is prime real estate. A lot of developers here realized that after the hurricane,” says Lynnette Colin, who collaborates with the Central City Renaissance Alliance (CCRA), the leading local neighborhood association, as head of the O.C. Haley Merchants and Business Association. But the elevation that attracts developers hasn’t made storm recovery in Central City any quicker. Several thousands of its residents remain displaced, while a 2008 baseline study by the CCRA notes that “Central City’s progress lags behind the city as a whole.” Additionally,

for modern networking. They went from raising funds with a food booth at New Orleans' Jazz Fest to accessing major national and international grant makers and community initiatives.

In 2006 and 2007, the United Houma Nation applied for and received more than \$300,000 in grants from nonprofits, including: \$100,000 for building materials from Church World Service; \$25,000 from Veterans for Peace; \$10,000 from



One Katrina Legacy: The Old Store Relief Center, a distribution center for emergency supplies.

the Rockefeller Gulf Coast Fund; and \$30,000 from Neighborworks America, a nonprofit created by Congress to promote community-based revitalization efforts.

Part of that money went to the Old Store Relief Center, an old general store that was transformed into an intake and distribution center for emergency supplies. Those efforts blossomed into the now-extensive United Houma Nation Relief Office. In 2008, the UHNRO provided crisis relief in the immediate aftermath of Hurricanes Gustav and Ike and followed up with ongoing community outreach and services.

Through the relief office, mini-grants of up to \$1,000 are available to tribal citizens who apply for a home-repair or fishing-vessel-repair grant. If a home is not repairable, the grant may go toward a down payment on a different house.

UHNRO program manager Samantha Shaffstall's desk has been piled with 90 to 100 case files at any given time since Gustav and Ike. An extensive database tracks the services that have been received by more than 2,500 Houma. Because Jim Crow laws prevented Houma children from attending

public schools until the mid-1960s, and the few "Indian schools" only went up to the seventh grade, many older Houma today have trouble accurately completing disaster-relief paperwork that's confusing by any standards.

To combat this problem, Shafstall often traverses the six-parish service district, meeting with tribal citizens to help them navigate the red-tape labyrinth of insurance claims and applications for disaster relief to the Federal Emergency Management Agency and Road Home, the state of Louisiana's program for homeowners displaced by the 2005 storms that's been so ineffectual that frustrated residents dubbed it "Road to Nowhere."

The Houma recovery effort is further bolstered by the tribe's partnership with community organizations in the Lower 9th Ward and the Carrollton-Hollygrove neighborhoods of New Orleans. These groups joined with Tulane Law School's Tulane Institute on Water Resources Law & Policy in July 2008 to form How Safe, How Soon? The project focuses specifically on hurricane preparedness, along with such issues as evacuation and return, and policy questions regarding levees and

coastal restoration. It also boasts an educational component, emphasizing ecologically sound building and rebuilding methods and simple tricks like deploying hurricane straps on roofs.

Even with increasing hurricane damage because of poor or absent levee protection, and advancing coastal erosion, Chief Robichaux says that with centuries of history in the area, it's "frustrating" when others suggest the answer to the Houma's problems is simply to abandon their land.

"We've had generation after generation who lived in these same communities," she says. "People can tell you stories about their fathers, their grandfathers, their great-great grandfathers, and some of the things that they did. So, for us it's a strong sense of community and ties to the community, ties to the land, ties to the area, ties to the lifestyle, the culture. It's not like where today people leave and buy a piece of property in a subdivision." **TAP**

David Holthouse is senior editor of the Southern Poverty Law Center's Intelligence Report. Priscilla Holthouse is a freelance writer in Montgomery, Alabama.

Translating Disaster

In the crisis, the Gulf's Hispanic communities dealt with linguistic and political isolation. But Katrina produced a boost to new organizing efforts.

BY CAROLYN PETRI

In New Orleans, "there is a white power structure and a black power structure but not really any in between," explains Latino community activist Jessica Venegas. Latinos hold little political power compared to their population size, which has tripled in the years since Hurricane Katrina struck in 2005. Seeking to be that "in between" in the city's power structure, in 2007 the Latino community founded Puentes, the city's first Latino-run and Latino-serving organization. Along with many other

community-based organizations across the Gulf Coast, Puentes is working to build social capital and to unify Latino voices so that for future crises, the community can avoid the kind of devastation it suffered in the wake of Katrina.

Katrina and its aftermath were a call to action not only for community groups like Puentes but also the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and grant-making organizations, like the Gates and Ford foundations, which are forging new connections with community groups in

order to improve disaster relief for Latinos. Advocacy groups such as the National Council of La Raza (NCLR) are lobbying for public-private partnerships that would further strengthen those relationships, binding regional experts with government resources to prevent the kinds of problems Latinos faced after Katrina from happening during the next natural disaster.

Hurricane Katrina hit Latinos harder than it hit most other ethnic communities. Many Spanish-speaking Latinos did not even evacuate—almost all storm warnings were broadcast in English. Many immigrant Latinos lost papers, a relative, or a job to which their immigration status was tied, jeopardizing their ability to receive emergency aid. Even though undocumented immigrants have the right to relief like food, health care, and refuge in the wake of a disaster, immigration officers raided at least two Red Cross shelters. Relief workers neglected an entire apartment complex in a New Orleans suburb, assuming its residents were undocumented and ineligible for housing assistance, neither of which turned out to be the case. Linguistic isolation and the legal complexities of non-citizens make *all* Latinos vulnerable to being excluded from federal aid. Lucas Diaz, Puentes' founder and executive director, says Katrina revealed the pervasiveness of linguistic barriers, legal issues, and discrimination. "Latinos were invisible prior to the storm," he says. But after the storm, he explains, "Immigrant concerns became an issue."

Despite the work that groups like Puentes are doing to elevate Latino issues, "increased public awareness of the Latino and immigrant experience during disasters has yet to translate fully into meaningful policy change," according to an NCLR report released last fall about reaching Latinos during times of crisis. This is partly because, due to limited resources, regional Latino community organizations focus on direct assistance to those in need rather than lobbying or developing Latino leaders. Without regional political representation, Latinos have had few voices for change. While groups like Puentes are working to build this Latino voice from the bottom up, the NCLR

report evinces a top-down approach, targeting emergency-management personnel, grant-makers, and government officials with clear and actionable recommendations to improve conditions for Latino communities in the aftermath of a natural disaster. At the top of the list is for President Barack Obama to issue an executive order that would suspend immigration enforcement until relief efforts are concluded. Many immigrant victims of Katrina landed in deportation proceedings when they sought relief.

NCLR also wants to see relief for all—regardless of citizenship status—during a disaster. This will take more than an executive order. Accordingly, NCLR recommends funding and networking com-

Latinos hold little political power compared to their population size, which has tripled in the years since Hurricane Katrina struck.

munity organizations so they can better serve Latinos; not only were community groups there for Latinos and immigrants during Katrina when the government was not but in the years since the storm, these groups have broken down the region's bipartite power structure by joining forces across racial lines to build political leverage key to policy change.

This would continue a trend in the region's uplift: public funding to support private community organizations—many of which are themselves "black-brown coalitions," partnerships between Latinos (brown) and African Americans (black). "One thing about Katrina is that it really elevated the need for African Americans and Latinos to break bread with one another, to think about their frame differently," says Catherine Montoya, who contributed to the NCLR report and works as a field manager for the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights. "It's not just about immigrants and being undocumented; it's about low-wage workers."

Grant-making foundations have taken notice of NCLR's emphasis on the crucial role of community groups. "One of the most significant changes we've seen over the past three years is the emergence of

highly networked community-based organizations that have become much more engaged in disaster preparedness and response," says Jerry Maldonado, director of the Ford Foundation's Gulf Coast initiative, which funds more than 100 community groups in the region. As black-brown coalitions have cropped up along the Gulf Coast, sponsoring foundations like Ford have funded these service- and advocacy-group networks. Community-based organizations often "do their own thing," says Bill Chandler, head of the Mississippi Immigrants Rights Alliance (MIRA), but foundation networking "has created an arena where people can talk, plan, work, and raise hell together when necessary."

But, cautions NCLR report co-author

Sara Benitez, this foundation funding is "not to replace what the federal government is doing or the American Red Cross." Adds Maldonado, "Despite this positive networking trend, private philanthropy and local community-based organizations can never substitute for the effective mobilization of local, state, and federal resources."

Still, the government has a long way to go. *Lessons Learned*, the initial post-Katrina self-evaluation put out by the Department of Homeland Security in 2006, only mentions vulnerable populations twice, low-income populations twice, and language barriers once, as NCLR notes. It only discusses immigration in its descriptions of how Immigration and Customs Enforcement assisted in general law enforcement.

Promisingly, the 2006 Emergency Management Reform Act took FEMA to task, mandating the agency work with state and local governments to identify limited-English-proficient groups, to account for them in planning, and to disseminate emergency information they can understand. FEMA must also put together a clearinghouse of language-assistance programs for state and local

governments to look at in shaping their own disaster-assistance plans.

Today, more than three years after the hurricane, public-private coalitions are even more crucial and more capable than the government alone or community groups alone. Many Latinos and immigrants are still facing post-Katrina challenges, such as being forced to vacate FEMA trailers, or “high-tech shotgun houses,” as Chandler puts it. Community groups like MIRA will provide the cultural, linguistic, and logistical expertise needed to best serve Latinos in this situa-

tion, while the government—in this case, Mississippi’s Emergency Management Agency—will provide the staff and funds to meet Chandler’s demand for aid.

Until Latino-specific groups like Puentes are able to make their political impact fully felt, public-private partnerships and black-brown coalitions are the best chance for securing human rights and public safety after a disaster. The members of these nascent alliances are working to ensure that the next time a natural disaster strikes the region, Latinos won’t be left behind. **TAP**

Housing New Orleans: Still a Work in Progress

Far too many people are still without decent affordable homes, and hidden vulnerable groups like the mentally ill have been hit hardest of all.

BY CHANDRA R. THOMAS

Some three and a half years after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita hit the city known as “The Big Easy,” it has been anything but easy for thousands of displaced New Orleans-area residents to find housing. Many have been forced onto the streets or into temporary and long-term shelters, largely due to bureaucratic delays and inadequate government-assistance programs.

A New Orleans housing report released in August 2008 by PolicyLink, an Oakland, California-based national research institute dedicated to advancing economic and social equity, indicated that the ranks of homeless residents doubled across affected South Louisiana parishes, with the New Orleans metro area homeless population alone reaching 12,000 residents. Thousands of others are living elsewhere, unable to return due to high rents, housing shortages, and delays in funding for rebuilding. Many who have made it back languish in substandard, crowded conditions.

“Families are doubled up and tripled

up in houses and apartments, trying to pay rent and utilities, unable to meet basic needs,” says Ayesha Buckner, homeless liaison for the Orleans Parish School Board. “All of the shelters are filled to capacity. The media portrays that [New Orleans] is back, but we’re not back. Every week we get new homeless children.”

Buckner says Orleans Parish is currently assisting about 1,600 homeless children in 18 schools. “A lot of people say the homeless drink, and they do,” she says matter-of-factly. “They drink *milk*—they’re kids.”

Among the report’s many findings is that four of every five New Orleans recipients in the Road Home Program, a \$10.3 billion initiative launched by former Gov. Kathleen Blanco of Louisiana to help homeowners statewide rebuild their damaged and destroyed houses, did not get enough money to cover their repairs. The largest single housing-recovery program in U.S. history, the federally funded program allocates up to \$150,000 to hurricane victims to rebuild their damaged

homes. It also provides loans and incentive grants to property owners who operate affordable rental homes, and offers building professionals and contractors training and construction resources to assist Road Home applicants.

At press time, the program reported \$7.6 billion in awards dispersed among 121,290 homeowners, with the average award at just less than \$63,000. But according to PolicyLink, the average Road Home applicant in Louisiana fell more than \$35,000 short of the money needed to restore his or her home. The shortfall hit hardest among highly flooded, historically African American communities.

According to Mike Miller, who helps find housing for the homeless as part of UNITY, a collaborative of 60 agencies working to address homelessness in New Orleans, “We have the perfect storm of homelessness in New Orleans—a natural disaster and no real infrastructure in place to handle the amount of need. We get the results of all of the failed systems: failed mental-health, housing, drug-treatment, and criminal systems. These people have nowhere to go.”

NEW ORLEANS RENTERS face the biggest hurdles. Rents have doubled and tripled from pre-Katrina rates, and only two in five damaged affordable rental units statewide are expected to be repaired or replaced with recovery assistance, the PolicyLink report found. It hasn’t helped that the Department of Housing and Urban Development has decided to demolish four out of 10 of the largest public-housing projects, displacing about 3,000 residents who had lived there pre-Katrina. Department representatives maintain that many of the city’s public-housing units were vacant or deemed unfit for habitation prior to Katrina.

This month, the federal disaster rental-assistance subsidies that had been keeping nearly 28,000 displaced families in housing nationwide (14,000 in the greater New Orleans metro region alone) are slated to officially run out, even though many affordable-housing units are still not ready for occupancy.

According to Ruth Idakula, who until recently spearheaded homeless initia-



Assessing The Damage: Wearing protective clothing, a man walks out after inspecting his home on Delery Street, in the Lower 9th Ward.

tives for New Orleans Councilmember Stacy Head, many large real estate development companies have been lured by tax credits, but too little of the subsidy reaches those who need it most. “The developers are required by law to build a certain amount of affordable housing units, but there hasn’t been enough stipulation on how many,” she says.

Many apartment developers who applied for tax credits after Katrina were required to set aside 5 percent of their units for supportive housing. However, high construction costs, the national credit crunch, and personal financial vulnerability have kept many landlords, particularly small operations, from being able to rebuild even with assistance. The result has been construction of fewer overall rental units.

BEFORE HURRICANE Katrina, life was already difficult for La’Tina King, a single parent of five girls ages 9 to 5—all with special psychiatric needs now exacerbated by the Katrina ordeal. Since the storm destroyed the family’s quaint three-bedroom rental house on the New Orleans West Bank, life has been stressful, frustrating, and overwhelming. Two

of her children have been diagnosed with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder. One daughter has oppositional-defiant disorder, which most often erupts in the form of violent panic attacks whenever it rains, no doubt a consequence of the family’s nightmarish Katrina ordeal. Thanks to Medicaid, all of her children see a psychiatrist twice a month, and two take psychiatric drugs daily. King, 27, is on antidepressants and sees a psychiatrist when she can. Of all of her many burdens, however, she worries most about finding a permanent home.

“I pray every day to the Lord to help me find a house,” she says. “Things would be so much better for me and my girls if we could just find a place to stay. Everybody deserves a place to call home.”

In the most literal sense, King and her brood are not *homeless*. Until recently, they lived in a pristine single-level home in an unassuming neighborhood in nearby Harvey. The modest but meticulously kept home is owned by King’s mother. King was grateful to have a place to live, but found it stressful to be one of two adults with five children cramped inside a small house for more than two years. “I’m a grown woman living with my mother,” King says. “I need

a place where I can be comfortable and my kids can run and play. I just can’t find a place that I can afford.” The tension of living with her mother took its toll, and King and her girls were forced to move out of the house and in with a friend.

King, who briefly relocated with her children to Dallas, Texas, after the storm, has sought assistance from every housing program in her area to no avail. From the local Housing and Urban Development office to the Westwego Housing Authority, she’s told that her name will be added to a waiting list—sometimes two or three years long—or that the list is closed for now. “I have looked into buying houses and renting houses, but everything is double and triple the price it was before the storm,” she says.

“The real problem is that a lot of people with mental illness are poor, which often limits access to care and housing,” explains Dr. Elmore Rigamer, a psychiatrist who serves as medical director of Catholic Charities Archdiocese of New Orleans. “When there is housing around, it’s usually not affordable. And even once you find them a place to live, you have to figure out how to maintain their access to the resources they need.”

NICOLE BENVENUTO / THE NEW YORK TIMES / REDUX

THREE AND A HALF YEARS after the hurricanes, in the most devastated areas of New Orleans, it's still common to glimpse rows of impeccably rebuilt homes nestled amid dilapidated eyesores with overgrown lawns and moldy interiors untouched since the floodwaters subsided. Despite the many housing challenges, though, there have been some glimmers of progress. Musicians Harry Connick Jr. and Branford Marsalis teamed up with Habitat for Humanity to create "Musicians' Village," a neighborhood of vibrantly colored homes for New Orleans musicians who lost their houses to Katrina. Actor Brad Pitt's Make It Right Foundation has also drawn national attention for its rebuilding efforts in the blighted Lower 9th Ward.

Along with placing thousands of displaced residents in shelters and low-cost housing, UNITY and the Archdiocese of New Orleans were part of a successful appeal to Congress in 2008 to allocate 3,000 Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) rent vouchers to be distributed to poor people with disabilities in New Orleans and across the state and to offer them free case-management services. PSH integrates permanent, affordable rental housing with the supportive services needed to help people with physical and mental disabilities access and maintain stable housing in the community. It is a nationally recognized model being replicated throughout the country as a cost-effective solution to preventing and ending homelessness among low-income people with disabilities—but there isn't enough of it.

"We have a long process ahead of evaluating and assessing our clients for available program slots, but we believe what we're doing is working," says Miller of UNITY. "Overall, I think we're seeing less homelessness. Will '09 be better? I don't know." **TAP**

Chandra R. Thomas is an award-winning Atlanta-based journalist whose work has appeared in Essence, Ebony, Newsweek, People, Upscale, Heart & Soul, and Atlanta magazines, as well as on Time.com.

Justice Polluted

An environmental-justice attorney explains how the civil rights of Gulf Coast residents were violated.

BY ADAM SERWER

The images of suffering from Hurricane Katrina are seared into America's collective memory: the flooded streets, the abandoned corpses, the residents crying for help that took days to arrive. Yet the months and years following the hurricane may provide even more egregious examples of government abdicating its responsibilities.

Monique Harden, the co-director of Advocates for Environmental Human Rights, an environmental-justice organization, explains why the Bush administration violated the civil rights of Gulf Coast residents and even the letter of the United Nations' guiding principles on internal displacement.

AS: Your organization fights environmental racism. What exactly is that?

MH: It's unequal environmental protection based on race. And so for example, the United States: the data collected by the Environmental Protection Agency shows that African Americans are 79 percent more likely than whites to live in polluted neighborhoods. This could be completely prevented if we had adequate laws that recognize that all people have a right to a healthy and safe environment. Instead, we have laws that look to the economic feasibility of polluters as a priority, not to health protection and environmental sustainability.

AS: How has environmental racism manifested in the Gulf Coast area?

MH: The typical way in which environmental racism expresses itself is that people don't have the right to determine their future in the community; someone else does, and that decision can be debilitating in terms of the future of that community. After Katrina, there's that

same kind of injustice, where the people who lived in the communities prior to the hurricane really don't have this right to determine what's best for their communities, what's best for restoration and rebuilding. Instead, they're having to contend with a decision to raze all the houses to put something else there, or not to open a public health-care facility, or in decisions to close down schools. These are the battles that are taking place all over the Gulf region in areas that were affected by the hurricanes, taking away the things that make a community a *community*, which means pushing people out of communities, whether it's Alabama or Mississippi or Louisiana.

AS: What has happened with displaced people who moved back to New Orleans?

MH: Many residents who manage to come back home still experience issues of displacement because of the closing of a local school or health-care facilities not being up and running or the job that you had before Katrina is no longer available, so you're struggling to find a way to make ends meet. No one in this country has the right to recover when a national disaster is declared. Everything is up to the discretion of whoever is in the White House, and under the Bush administration, that has meant ushering in a disaster-response agenda that really boils down to privatizing public services and unraveling basic social networks that people have relied on in this region.

When a national disaster is declared, it triggers a federal law called the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act. The law is extremely problematic because it grants the president complete discretionary authority over all matters involving governmental

response to the disaster, with just a few small exemptions. And it explicitly denies an individual affected by a national disaster the right to claim assistance or compensation for loss. So it's basically a law that denies governmental accountability when you need government the most.

AS: Does that mean residents who say they were poisoned by the formaldehyde in their FEMA trailer don't have any standing to sue the government?

MH: The lawsuits right now are against the companies that manufactured the trailers and not against the government. There [was] a class-action lawsuit [struck down in December]. Again, it [was] a private piece of litigation—individual residents who were in the FEMA trailers versus the companies that manufactured those trailers that were then sold to the government. So it bypass[ed] governmental accountability and responsibility.

AS: How are the environmental circumstances affecting public health?

MH: In many parts of our state, air quality is unhealthy because of the pollution. We have a high mortality rate when it comes to cancer. But we're promoting companies that release cancer-causing, lung-damaging pollutants to operate here. In addition, the coastal region of our state has been significantly eroded, primarily through the infrastructure for drilling offshore for oil and gas. There's no accountability system there, either. We've got submerged lands and open water that allow the storm systems and hurricanes to wreak havoc on populated areas just north of the coastal area. With that kind of industrial use of our state, it's really left us more vulnerable to natural disasters like Hurricane Katrina as well as the ongoing disasters of toxic exposures that are happening in many African American communities.

Since Katrina, one of the concerns has been the potential for exposure to pollutants such as lead, diesel contaminants, and volatile organic compounds, which were all detected in the mud that was left after the area was drained of the floodwaters. And we got the message from the Environmental Protection Agency that it

had no support from the Bush administration to go in and do any cleanup.

AS: Would you consider these to be human-rights violations?

MH: Our government actually has established a post-Katrina agenda that is in conflict with human-rights standards, as well as in conflict with our own U.S. foreign-aid policy. The United Nations has a set of standards that establish the duty of national governments to protect the rights of people who are displaced. These standards would not have been enacted without the insistence and cooperation of the U.S. government. So it's really ironic that our government now doesn't seem to know they exist.

We were able to bring [the post-Katrina situation in New Orleans] to the attention of the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD). It was not just about housing, but other issues ... from managing health care to the environment. The committee reviewed our government's compliance with the CERD treaty and determined that the right to freedom from racial discrimination, particularly in housing, was being undermined by governmental actions. Again, the guiding principles are hinged on the right to housing and the right to freedom of movement: being able to have a choice to return home or resettle elsewhere or reintegrate into the place where you may be evacuated. But it's really being denied here in the post-Katrina Gulf region where affordable housing (public housing being included in that) has been demolished in Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana.

AS: So what the government did was a violation of the U.N. principles on internal displacement?

MH: The principles specifically prohibit action taken by government that would alter the racial or religious demographic of the displaced population. And it's happening on a daily basis in this region, with the government demolishing public and affordable housing, removing public health-care facilities, closing public schools, and making it hard for landlords to continue to rent to people who are eli-

gible for rental assistance. Again, you see this progression toward pushing people out throughout the Gulf region.

Although the U.N. guiding principles on internal displacement are not a law and not a treaty, they're derived from human-rights laws and treaties that our government is obligated to uphold because we've ratified them. And so we've had not one but two U.N. treaty-monitoring committees say, "Hey, United States government, you're undermining fundamental human rights, and you should be implementing the U.N. guide on internal displacement. To do anything less and to continue the actions that have been undertaken thus far would only deny them their fundamental rights, because you still don't have an infrastructure that would protect communities from flooding."

AS: What would a better U.S. government policy look like?

MH: We all deserve a law that at the very least places governmental responsibility and individual rights in a way that comports with basic human rights and specifically the U.N. guiding principles on internal displacement. The first responsibility under the guiding principles is that [government] should prevent, if at all possible, the conditions that can cause displacement. That certainly wasn't done here. We had substandard levees that caused 80 percent of New Orleans to flood. That's government action, to have built these levees as badly as they did. The flooding of 450,000 or so people and residents caused massive displacement.

Also, when you look at climate change, and you know the effect is going to be stronger hurricanes, and you're doing nothing to curb or reduce the amount of carbon dioxide going into the environment, you're laying the ground for future displacement. So it's necessary to take care of the environment and infrastructure to ensure that people are not displaced from their homes. That's in the guiding principles. Following a disaster, they also call for the government to build up an infrastructure that ensures the safety of communities, so that you can avoid this happening or at least mitigate these kinds of consequences in the future. **TAP**



THANKS TO HOPE

And thanks to people like you, the children at Clear Head Learning Center have a safe place to learn and grow as their families recover from the devastating effects of Hurricane Katrina. Financing provided by HOPE enabled Clear Head to quickly make repairs after the storm and reopen to provide residents from across New Orleans with quality daycare services for their children.

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- Millions in financing provided to homeowners, small businesses, and nonprofits
- Expanded HOPE's presence in New Orleans and on the Mississippi Coast

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Anatomy of a Netroots Failure

Liberal bloggers wanted Darcy Burner to win. That wasn't enough.

BY ELI SANDERS

To understand how invested online activists were in the campaign of Darcy Burner—the bright, tech-savvy, and ultimately failed candidate for Congress in Washington state's 8th Congressional District—consider what happened in February of last year, when the University of Washington's student newspaper, not normally a major player in national politics, published excerpts of an interview with Burner campaign spokesman Sandeep Kaushik.

Speaking to a student reporter about the nationwide army of liberal bloggers and online activists who have become a force at all levels of politics in recent years, Kaushik said: "They're not at the point yet where they can really swing a race. Part of my job is making sure people know the blogosphere is not the campaign."

Impolitic words in this Internet era, certainly. But as it turned out, he was partly correct. Despite their many successes in 2008, liberal bloggers and members of the online "netroots" could not, in fact, swing this particular race to a candidate who had become a barometer of their clout. They now openly lament Burner's defeat as their biggest failure of the cycle.

Still, back in February 2008, to suggest that such an outcome might be possible—and to suggest, by extension, that there might be a ceiling of netroots influence at all—was highly taboo. Kaushik was quickly made to understand that the second part of his statement (that his job was to distance the Burner campaign from the blogosphere) was absolutely incorrect. In a post titled "Loyalty," published in near-immediate response to the appearance of Kaushik's quotations in the student newspaper, Jane Hamsher, of the influential national blog Firedoglake, reminded the campaign that liberal blogs had helped Burner raise nearly \$125,000 in the primary. Now, in her opinion, the campaign was biting the online hand that fed it. "I can't think of another contributor who would raise that much money and get repaid like this," she wrote, calling for Kaushik's head. "They need to ditch this clown."

Hundreds of commenters chimed in, many agreeing, and by the next day, the Burner campaign had released a statement distancing itself from Kaushik's words. A copy of the statement now closes that particular Firedoglake comment thread: "We are truly sorry that a part-time political consultant associated with this campaign said things to a college student which

reflects poorly on Darcy and her campaign. Please know that they do not reflect her views."

The chastised Kaushik stayed on with the campaign, but the lesson was clear: Attention, and deference, must be paid.

ONE CAN CERTAINLY understand why online activists felt such ownership. While it's true that in the end, traditional liberal power brokers such as the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee and EMILY's List were the biggest outside players in Burner's race (giving much more than the liberal blogosphere alone could), it is also true that the netroots made Darcy Burner. They launched her as an online political phenomenon, campaigned against her primary challengers, made her a unique financial force in Washington state politics, and helped convince Democratic decision-makers to get on board. Bloggers will tell you this. Political reporters of all stripes will tell you this. And while Burner would never describe herself as "made" by the netroots, just try to get her to criticize them, even mildly. She won't. She knows the score.

More important, she truly believes in the power of the Web and feels an affinity with those who are trying to use it to push the progressive agenda. Sure, the Internet didn't end up delivering her to Congress. But she shares the hope of many liberal bloggers that someday, they'll be able to not only launch candidates but also tip difficult races of national importance—races like hers—in their chosen direction.

For now, however, Burner's story shows how far there is to go before that hope can be fully realized. She first emerged in 2006, when liberal bloggers vaulted her from political nowhere into viability as a congressional challenger in the 8th District, an ideologically mixed, suburban-and-rural area just east of Seattle that is home to the world headquarters of Microsoft. Burner had worked as a midlevel manager for the tech giant, but her political résumé was thin: chairing a women's group at work and serving as president of her neighborhood's Community Association. Her opponent, Dave Reichert, a Republican congressman and former sheriff, made experience a key 2006 campaign issue, and Burner lost—albeit by a notably small margin. The outcome was both heartening and heartbreaking for the bloggers who had showered her with money and support; she had, in the end, earned a higher percentage of the vote (48.5 percent) than had any other Democrat in the history of the district.

In 2008 Burner tried a second time. Once again, the liberal blogosphere showered her with money and enthusiasm (while also directing venom at her enemies, real and perceived). Once again, the race was notably close. And once again, Burner lost—this time by a slightly larger margin—in a year when Democrats made huge gains nationally. Now hoping to land a job pushing the progressive tech agenda in D.C., Burner is reaching for the big picture. “We’re at an inflection point and everybody can feel it,” she told me recently, speaking of the potential for partisan online media outlets to eventually tip a race. “In the long term, I think I’m on the better side of that debate.”

In the meantime, however, leaders of the netroots are still smarting and trying to sort out what the loss means for their movement. Essentially, in the Burner case, they started something they couldn’t finish. Joan McCarter, who lives in Washington state and posts as “McJoan” on the front page of the liberal mega-blog DailyKos, told me in January: “I’m still in the grieving phase.” Matt Stoller, who helped found the national blog OpenLeft and temporarily moved to Seattle in the fall of 2008 to help with the last months of the Burner campaign, still gets angry when he talks about the outcome.

Their grief seems all the more acute because Burner is, in many ways, one of them. She is well educated (she went to Harvard), firmly planted on the left (as a self-styled populist), fluent in new media and its political potential (from her time at Microsoft), and fired up (to such a degree that it got her in trouble on the trail). In the idealistic and meritocratic world of the netroots, where commenters and bloggers rise and fall on the quality of their ideas and passion, these traits make for an instant star. Burner *got it*.

And yet she didn’t prevail at the polls. “She was our biggest failure,” says David Goldstein, who runs the liberal Washington state blog HorsesAss.org. “Not in the sense that her race was the easiest to win. But she was *the* most netroots candidate.”

ON A COLD MORNING in early January, Darcy Burner sat across from me at a small corner table at Chace’s Pancake Corral, exactly the kind of working-class 8th District hangout where she might stage a campaign appearance—if she were still campaigning. Her hybrid sports-utility vehicle was parked outside, still bearing familiar election-season bumper stickers: Barack Obama for President, Darcy Burner for Congress, a Human Rights Campaign logo, another sticker announcing her purchase of carbon offsets for the vehicle. She ordered the eggs cashew and a waffle. It was almost a flashback to her time on the campaign trail, except for the topic of our conversation: why she didn’t win.

Like any politician, Burner wanted to focus on the positive. Even though she lost her second bid for Congress by a larger vote margin than her first, she pointed out that she garnered more *absolute votes* in her second race than had any other Democratic House candidate who’s ever run in the 8th District—a “swing district” that, as far as its House seat is concerned, has never actually swung. The district was created in 1982 and has been trending Democratic for some time, voting for Democratic presidents (Gore, Kerry, and Obama) and a Democratic senator

(Patty Murray). But it has yet to send a Democrat to the House; Reichert, a self-styled moderate with plenty of conservative positions and votes, is now in his third term.

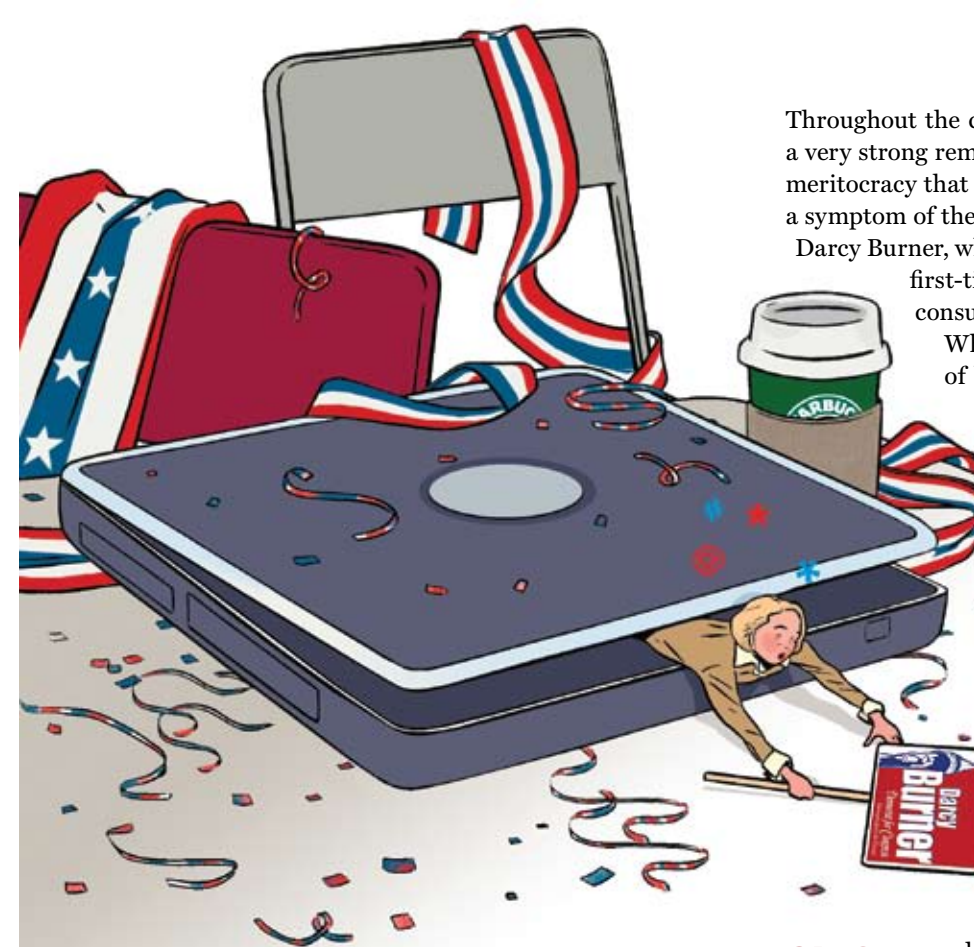
As we ate, Burner ticked another item off her list of positives: her “Responsible Plan” to end the war in Iraq, which she created with the help of retired Army general Paul Eaton and released in March 2008, early in the campaign season. It called for drawing down troop levels and refocusing on diplomacy in the region, among a host of other proposals that have become standard Democratic fare. Initially pushed by bloggers, the Responsible Plan quickly migrated into the mainstream media, getting coverage from publications like *The Washington Post* and *Politico*. It was eventually endorsed and trumpeted by dozens of Democrats in House races around the country. Eric Massa used it in his successful campaign for New York’s 29th District and, Burner said, he recently called her to thank her for her help.

More than just a tribute to Burner’s initiative and intelligence, the plan exemplified the netroots’ contribution to congressional elections as a whole—using a few vanguard candidates to set issue agendas for progressives that would be far more daring and unashamedly left than the safe bromides dished out to campaigns by the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee and national consultants. Ultimately, it contributed to changing the national debate, as Burner describes it, “from stay-the-course or cut-and-run to responsibly ending the war or not.”

That’s no small achievement. It was not, however, enough to win the 8th District.

SO WHAT WENT WRONG? Burner told me it wasn’t that she was too close to the liberal blogosphere, though that’s somewhat debatable. Advisers had urged her to be wary of being perceived as the netroots candidate, and Republicans saw it as a vulnerability, repeatedly pushing the idea that Burner was a willing tool of radical leftist online elites from out of state who were meddling in Washington state politics. In the comment thread of a Washington conservative blog in October 2008, a comment attributed to Reichert campaign manager Mike Shields read: “If burner [sic] wins, she will prove that even a candidate with no experience, no real connection to her community, who is to the left of the local voters, can raise enough money from national activists that they can elect someone in YOUR local district. This will embolden them to futher [sic] this model nationally.”

Against Burner, Reichert ran toward the center. He distanced himself from George W. Bush, touted his (limited) bipartisan accomplishments, and plugged his efforts to help restructure the Federal Emergency Management Agency after its failures during Hurricane Katrina. Burner, on the other hand, had a sort of dual persona: even-keeled anti-war Democrat in public, fiery populist online. Occasionally, parts of her personality that her campaign probably wanted to confine to the Web—as if such a thing were possible—migrated offline. At one point during the campaign, she told *Seattle* magazine that Reichert was a “white-haired warmonger.” In July 2008, when her house burned to the ground early one morning



due to faulty wiring (no one was injured, but the house was a total loss), Burner was photographed wearing a gray T-shirt with white letters reading: `</war>`. That’s Web-code-speak for “end war,” and probably not a slogan many of her district’s swing voters were wearing on their chest at the time. (For the netroots, however, the photograph became another “She’s one of us!” moment.)

Ultimately, Republicans were able to successfully do with the “Burner is a netroots radical” meme what liberal bloggers had been able to with the Responsible Plan. That is, they got the mainstream media to notice and start chattering. *Time* magazine asked of the Burner-Reichert race: “Will the Netroots Sink a Microsoft Dem?” *The Seattle Times* led off Burner’s candidate profile by juxtaposing her 8th District image and her netroots persona: “While her campaign talks up her blue-collar roots and family life, online activists from all over the country see her as one of their own.”

“We gave the right an easy target against Darcy,” McCarter of DailyKos admits. “That’s a tough position to be in because we’re not going to shut up, we’re not going to go away. But, yeah, when we take on an issue for our agenda, we can become a liability.”

Additionally, the very traits that made Burner so popular among liberal netizens probably were not so endearing to the blue-collar residents of the southern part of the 8th District (an area that is quite close to the Fort Lewis Army base and therefore also has a significant number of military families).

Throughout the campaign, this area in particular provided a very strong reminder that offline politics is not the virtual meritocracy that members of the netroots have created. “It’s a symptom of their idealism that they can pick someone like Darcy Burner, who’s never run for office, and turn her into a first-tier congressional candidate,” a Democratic consultant told me.

When I asked Burner whether being the type of liberal that online activists love made her too far left for her district, she replied by setting up questions she felt more comfortable answering: “Am I a populist? Yes. Do I think that this country needs populists right now? Yes. Do I think Reichert’s a populist? Not at all.”

This is, of course, a bit of a dodge.

For starters, “populist” can mean a lot of things. Burner seems to use the word to signal to the netroots that she’s in favor of its “people-powered politics” and to signal to voters than she’s on the side of working people. The thing is, in swing districts such as the 8th, “populist” is not always a winning rallying cry and can, in some quarters, mean something

closer to “dangerous radical.” I asked Burner: Does the 8th District really want a populist?

“I think it’s mixed,” she said—a fact that to some would call for the kind of campaign the netroots might deride as overly safe and politically milquetoast. “But I think this country needs more populists,” she continued. “And I think this district needs more populists. And, by the way, this district could probably use someone in Congress who understands something about technology, which is the backbone of the economy locally.” She sounded a little exasperated, a little too close to the caricature of her as an arrogant geek elite. Perhaps trying to take the edge off, she added with a smirk, “I’m just sayin’.”

I could imagine lefty blog commenters around the country cheering at the populism—however vaguely defined—and the techno-boosterism. I could also imagine cautious political consultants wincing.

GOLDSTEIN, THE WASHINGTON state blogger who was Burner’s biggest advocate in 2008, told me that while the netroots were tremendously important in funneling money to her campaign—more than \$750,000 was sent through the Act-Blue Web site alone—they failed completely in their efforts to push people to question Reichert’s accomplishments and “moderate” claims.

It was a major challenge. Almost by definition, swing voters in suburban-and-rural districts like the 8th don’t read liberal

JASON SCHNEIDER

blogs like Goldstein's. Even if they did, he's hardly a mass-media operation; during the final months of the campaign he had at most 3,500 daily visitors to his blog. While blogger fantasies involve a future in which traditional media companies have less of a hold on the mass audience, for the moment, Goldstein told me, "it's not so much about getting around the media. ... It's about pushing the media. It's about pushing headlines, driving the media coverage, and establishing the frame." Liberal bloggers were able to do this with the Responsible Plan, but they weren't able to do this when it came to tearing down Reichert. They don't explain this as a failure of influence or political savvy on their part; they say the local mainstream media was biased against Burner.

In particular, they blame a late October story by *Seattle Times* political writer Emily Heffter that questioned whether Burner was being truthful about her Harvard degree. They also decry a decision by local television stations to sell the Reichert campaign ad time on credit—time he used for tough ads casting Burner, who does in fact have a degree from Harvard, as having lied about her resumé.

The Heffter story arose when Burner, retooling her talking points for a moment when economic fears were trumping all else, said on several occasions that she'd been encouraged to study economics as an undergraduate, and "I loved economics so much I got a degree in it, from Harvard." This statement was on video that was easily acquired, and it was not, technically, true. Burner does have a degree from Harvard. But the degree is in computer science. She also has a "special field" in economics, meaning she took five Harvard economics courses.

Heffter's front-page story cast Burner's economics-degree claim as an exaggeration and explained the "special field" situation. But politics is about what can be said in sound bites and simple language. All Reichert needed for a lethal television attack ad was a video clip of Burner saying, "I loved economics so much I got a degree in it, from Harvard," and one sentence torn out of the Heffter article: "Burner doesn't have an economics degree from Harvard." With everyone debating Burner's Ivy League pedigree, swing voters had another reason to either resent Burner as an elitist or to reject her as a liar.

The fury that Burner and liberal bloggers feel about the impact of the Heffter story and the ensuing television ads is connected to their frustration at being unable to drown it all out with their own version of reality—and a reminder of the current limits of blog influence. Even though political blogs are powerful and growing more so all the time, they still are not nearly as influential as a mainstream newspaper article that gets turned into an effective television attack ad that gets turned into days of



YOU DON'T WIN FRIENDS AND INFLUENCE MAINSTREAM REPORTERS (OR BLUE-COLLAR VOTERS IN THE 8TH DISTRICT) BY GIVING THEM THE VERY CLEAR SENSE THAT YOU THINK THEY'RE "KIND OF DUMB."

like us"—believes this attitude is justified, because deeply, and apparently before all else, he believes in pushing forcefully against centers of power that are perceived to be hostile. "Ultimately, saying 'don't push on centers of power'—I don't think that's going to lead you anywhere," he said.

Well, sure, politics is about the exercise of raw power. But the Burner campaign's successes and failures prove that bloggers don't have it in sufficient quantities—not yet, anyway—to behave as if they can dictate the terms of the debate and to condescend, you-got-punk'd-style, to those they need to persuade. They misunderstand human nature if they think that people will be persuaded after a good talking-down to.

To put it another way: In this race, it sometimes seemed as if the bloggers' deepest dream was to no longer have to deal with the stupid people in politics. If only that were possible. **TAP**

Eli Sanders is the senior staff writer for The Stranger, an alternative weekly in Seattle.

talk-radio chatter (as happened in this case).

If you want to deal with the first link in that chain, the mainstream newspaper, you have to deal in the realm of objective journalism. Which means you have to be able to influence reporters who believe in and practice that kind of writing. The National Republican Congressional Committee—which tipped off Heffter to the story—grasped this and made the most of the situation. The liberal bloggers could not. Neither could Burner. After Heffter's story came out, Burner posted the following on her Twitter feed: "It's bad enough Republicans baldly lie. But the MSM press aids and abets. I am, at this moment, glad both institutions are failing." She also told Heffter herself that she'd been "punk'd" by the NRCC. Not the normal tone for politicians courting good press but fairly typical for the blogosphere.

Liberal bloggers do face serious long-term challenges in reaching a mass audience that includes swing voters, but it doesn't help their cause when so many of their current media-relations problems are self-inflicted. While they and their favored candidates may indeed be some of the smartest people in the political arena at any given moment, you don't win friends and influence mainstream reporters (or blue-collar voters in the 8th District) by giving them the very clear sense that you think they're stupid—or, as OpenLeft's Stoller described the premise of this story during our interview, "kind of dumb." I am not alone in falling on the wrong side of a Manichean, blogger-enforced divide and ending up cast as an incompetent enemy, simply for having asked questions that Burner's blog supporters don't like. Stoller—who told me point blank, "You don't like her, and you don't

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Britain's Great Right Hope

The Tories' long comeback is finally on the verge of success. Are Republicans paying attention?

BY JAMES CRABTREE

The Two Chairmen is a cozy backstreet pub, nestled in the heart of the Westminster Village—the small corner of London that includes 10 Downing St., Parliament, and most of Britain's major government departments. On a warm summer day in May 1994, two young Conservative Party political advisers stood outside, discussing the unexpected death of then-Labour Party leader John Smith, and his likely replacement: the young, telegenic Tony Blair. The more experienced of the two, Patrick Rock, was a hard-nosed spin doctor for Britain's hawkish home secretary, Michael Howard. The second drinker, younger-looking than even his 28 years would suggest, was future conservative leader David Cameron.

"We both agreed," Rock later recalled, "that Blair coming meant that we [Conservatives] would be fucked." A decade and a half later, even after Cameron's three highly successful years at the helm of the Conservative Party, Rock and Cameron must take no satisfaction from the accuracy of that prediction. Their party was once the Western world's most formidable election-winning machine. That is, until the 1997 election saw their deeply unpopular right-wing leader ejected from office and replaced by a young, popular, and charismatic leader of the left. The party of Disraeli, Churchill, and Thatcher never really found an answer to Tony Blair. But, from a starting point of electoral defeat and intellectual depletion eerily similar to that faced by today's Republicans in the U.S., it lost a decade, four leaders, and two more elections trying to find one.

It wasn't until Cameron's surprise election as leader in 2005 that the Tories began to turn the corner. Cameron has spent the last three years busily fixing his broken party, introducing new purpose, new policies, and even a new logo—a green oak tree. Mixing traditional conservative issues like low taxes and small government with newer policy platforms focused on the environment and poverty, Cameron has revitalized the British center-right. His path has not always been straightforward, having been challenged first by Gordon Brown's honeymoon as Britain's prime minister (following Tony Blair's departure in 2006) and again by Brown's political comeback during the early months of the current financial crisis. But today opinion polls once again strongly suggest Cameron will become the country's prime minister at the

next election, due at some point before mid-2010. Other center-right parties, in Europe and elsewhere, have already begun to copy his spin on compassionate conservatism.

But why did it take the better part of a decade in the wilderness for the once-dominant British right to bounce back? And how might the experience of a decade of conservative doldrums, finally broken only by Cameron's success, inform expectations about the Republican Party in the U.S. as it contemplates the road back from defeat?

DAVID CAMERON—OR DAVE, as he likes to be known—is in some ways an oddly conventional Tory savior. Unlike Margaret Thatcher (a shopkeeper's daughter) or John Major (whose parents were circus performers), Cameron is a son of privilege, having attended Eton, England's most famous private school, and Oxford, where he was a member of the Bullingdon, an exclusive—and famously destructive—drinking club. Like George W. Bush, and quite unlike Britain's current prime minister, Gordon Brown, he largely ignored politics in his youth, in favor of parties and girlfriends. (Also like Bush, he has never denied experimenting with cocaine.) However, after leaving college in 1988, he turned down a job as an accountant to take a junior position as a Conservative Party staffer. He rose quickly, becoming both an adviser and speechwriter to various senior politicians, including John Major, whom he briefed prior to Major's weekly appearances at Parliament's boisterous Prime Minister's Questions. But, seeing the writing on the wall for his increasingly unpopular party, Cameron left politics in 1994 to take a well-paid job as a senior executive at one of Britain's biggest television companies.

From this private-sector perch, Cameron was able to watch his party's crash unfold. In truth, the rot set in before he left, beginning in 1992 when Britain was thrown out of the European Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM), a national economic humiliation that scuttled John Major's government almost before it began. Major struggled for another five years—his only electoral victory was really a reflection of the weakness of his opponent, Labour's wordy, balding Neil Kinnock—and his administration was notable only for the completeness of its disunity and the regularity of its sex scandals. (One minister was caught wearing

a Chelsea football uniform in bed with his lover; others were caught hiring prostitutes or having affairs with staffers. One was even found dead, following sexual misadventure, naked with a piece of orange peel in his mouth.) The party was intellectually exhausted and morally bankrupt. The only surprise about Tony Blair's eventual victory was the size of his landslide.

Cameron came back to politics in 2001, becoming a member of parliament in an election that his party lost handily. With his obvious intelligence and strong media performances, he was soon talked up as a future party leader; he and his friend George Osborne were dubbed the "Blair and Brown" of next-generation Conservatives. But Cameron's return also coincided with the mid-stages of what one former adviser described as the "extended nervous breakdown" of the British right. After 1997, the party of "one nation" conservatism had been reduced to little more than a regional force, with support only in south-



ern and rural England. Urban areas, along with the entirety of Scotland and Wales, were Tory-free zones. The party was also old; the average age of dues-paying party supporters was around 65. Some worried it might literally die out.

The Conservatives were out of touch, obsessing over issues the country was not particularly concerned with, such as the power of the European Union and the rise of immigration. Economically, they favored tax cuts at a time when the public wanted money spent on dilapidated schools and hospitals. Conservatives seemed prurient, mean, and xenophobic, even as Britain was increasingly tolerant, diverse, and cosmopolitan. Cameron calls himself a "liberal conservative," saying his beliefs stem from a desire to "give people more control over their lives" and an expectation that "social responsibility has to be part of everyone's lives." But, just as Tony Blair's politics were forged as a reaction to the British left's period of exile during the 1980s, so Cameron found his calling to update his party's image and beliefs during these long, seemingly hopeless years of Conservative irrelevance.

Successive Conservative leaders made faltering attempts to convince voters that the Tories had moved beyond their image as "the nasty party." In the name of tolerance, their first leader

after the 1997 defeat, William Hague, made a trip to London's multi-ethnic Notting Hill Carnival. He also tried to connect with voters by talking about "kitchen-table conservatism," an idea borrowed from U.S. Republicans. (The Notting Hill trip was a public-relations fiasco, as was the actual kitchen table he installed in the Conservatives' London headquarters.) Conservatives' next head, Iain Duncan Smith, began to take seriously public concerns about schools and hospitals and developed a new agenda on social justice, which ultimately had significant influence on Cameron. Duncan Smith's successor and Cameron's predecessor, Michael Howard, also made noises about the importance of developing a party "broad in appeal and generous in outlook." Each understood that his party needed to mend its right-wing reputation and move back to the political center.

But, crucially, none approached the task of updating the Conservatives' image with the determination needed for suc-

THE PARTY OF DISRAELI, CHURCHILL, AND THATCHER NEVER REALLY FOUND AN ANSWER TO TONY BLAIR. IT WASN'T UNTIL CAMERON'S ELECTION IN 2005 THAT THE TORIES BEGAN TO TURN THE CORNER.

cess. Their attempts at what centrist conservatives have called "modernization" (aping language used first by Tony Blair) were never wholehearted, at least in part because none fully accepted that the party was fundamentally out of touch with the mood of the country. As such they were never able to engineer a decisive break with previous policies and identities—a move that required picking definitional fights with the old guard and taking counterintuitive political positions to convince voters and the media that they had changed. Instead, all three followed a familiar pattern: an initial, tentative foray

into the center resulting in lost support from their base, requiring a corrective lurch back to the right and its tried-and-tested agendas on Europe, immigration, tax, and crime.

It was a pattern with an equally familiar end: electoral defeat. Until 1997, every leader of the Conservative Party for more than half a century had become prime minister. After that year, none of its next three leaders even came close. Cameron and his supporters, who soon became known as "Cameroons," decided that, when their time came, they wouldn't repeat the mistake. They would make the center ground of politics their home.

WHEN CAMERON'S CHANCE at power did come, a number of factors had begun to make his task easier. Tony Blair—the dominant political figure of his generation—had been brought down to earth by the failed and deeply unpopular war in Iraq and his dalliances with George W. Bush. Blair's government had been further weakened by years of infighting with his heir presumptive, Gordon Brown. More important, Cameron's Conservative colleagues, having tried and failed with three different leaders, were more willing to take seriously the need for a fundamental change.

Yet the party was scarcely closer to power than it had been a decade before. Michael Howard ran a competent campaign in the 2005 election but won only 32 percent of the vote and made almost no inroads in younger, urban, or northern Britain. Most damningly, polls revealed the Conservative brand remained tarnished. In one celebrated example, voters in a blind test were found to agree with many Conservative policies. But, if those policies were revealed to be part of the official Conservative Party platform, many of the same voters suddenly turned against them. Even after eight years in opposition, the Conservatives could still take popular policies and make them unpopular—such as their 2005 election pledge to clean-up Britain’s hospitals—simply by being in favor of them. Changing this perception problem became Cameron’s first priority.

The median position of British politics remains far to the left of America; a “liberal conservative” in the U.K. has more in common with a Democrat across the pond. Indeed, if Cameron were a Republican, his views on health care, abortion rights, and gun control would likely lead to a primary challenge. Nonetheless, the situation in which today’s Republicans find themselves is strikingly similar to that which Britain’s Tories endured in the decade before Cameron took over. Both parties had long exhausted the inheritance of their 1980s renaissance and been corrupted by long stints in power. Both had unpopular and discredited leaders. And, in both countries, the right was divided as to how to fight back.

British Conservatives started to turn things around when they finally picked the right candidate after their 2005 loss. In Cameron they found a plausible, likeable, media-friendly politician. A handsome man with a young family, he is striking normal, a frequent television viewer with a taste for shows like *Desperate Housewives*. He is new-media savvy and has used an online video diary known as “webcameron” to showcase his everyday life—including episodes in which he is washing the dishes at home and making breakfast for his children. For the first time in a decade, the Conservative Party managed to pick someone whom voters could warm to. Yet initially, Cameron wasn’t even the second-favorite to win.

At the beginning of the leadership contest, the frontrunner was David Davis, a tough right-winger with a background in the armed forces. Cameron, while seen as a future leader, was thought not to be ready for prime time. After the fact, he said that he never doubted that his message would win the day. But few—either in the media or in his own party—agreed. On the day the leadership contest was announced, Cameron’s entire team of senior supporters arrived for a speech in a single taxi.

The picture changed at the Conservative Party conference in October 2005, where Cameron gave a speech—without notes—in which he argued that the party had to “change and modernize our culture and attitudes and identity ... a fundamental change, so that when we fight the next election we have a message that is relevant to people’s lives today, that shows we’re comfortable with modern Britain and that we believe our best days lie ahead.” The speech was perhaps as significant for Britain’s Tories as Barack Obama’s 2004 Democratic Convention speech

was for the American left. Before the speech, Cameron was a long shot for party leader. After it, he was a sure bet.

CONSERVATIVE WRITER DAVID FRUM has noted a trend toward anti-intellectualism on the American right, noting “the strongest reason for doubting Republican chances in 2010 is the collapsed intellectual state of the party.” Much the same was true of Britain’s pre-Cameron Conservatives, who remained in favor of old Thatcherite orthodoxies. (One adviser told me, “If you were patrician and sneering, you got ahead, and if you pooh-poohed new ideas, you did well.”) Cameron managed to overcome this anti-intellectual culture and made a point of attaching himself and his party to new ideas, emphasizing compassion in social policy, pragmatism on the role of the state, and tolerance on matters of personal morality.

In particular, he began to talk about the need to achieve “pro-



The Tory Blair And Brown: David Cameron (right) sits with shadow chancellor George Osborne during a TV broadcast of Prime Minister’s Questions.

gressive goals by conservative means,” talking up provision of state services by the nonprofit sector—in practice, not dissimilar from American compassionate conservatism’s faith-based initiatives but without the religious overtones. Both he and Osborne jumped on the bandwagon of behavioral economics, in particular the thesis of Cass Sunstein and Richard Thaler in their 2008 book, *Nudge*, which Cameron believed was a way of achieving social change with limited state intervention. He ventured into a number of traditionally left-wing policy areas, from defending Britain’s National Health Service to combating inner-city poverty and worrying about social mobility. Cameron began talking about the environment, adopting the phrase “vote blue, go green” (blue is the color associated with Britain’s Conservatives) and even taking a famous trip to a melting Norwegian glacier, where he was photographed riding a team of huskies.

All of this was tied together in a roughly coherent narrative about the need to repair “broken Britain,” allowing the new leader to attack Labour on its home turf while also talking about traditional Conservative moral issues (such as teen pregnancy or welfare reform) without coming across as “anti-poor.” Cameron served notice that he was running the

equivalent of a 50-state strategy. No issue would be off limits.

Yet Cameron faced a problem: how to talk about these topics without pushing away moderate voters. The answer—seemingly obvious but elusive to his predecessors—was to invent a new, softer language to communicate traditional positions. Conservative activists, for instance, wanted tax cuts. British voters did, too, but not if they led to crumbling hospitals and schools with leaky roofs. To get around this problem, Cameron began talking about the need to “share the proceeds of growth” between tax cuts and public investment, a suitably vague compromise that managed both to placate activists and convince the public that a future Tory government wouldn’t cut public spending. Borrowing a phrase coined by Democratic thinker Andrei Cherny, the Camerons also reframed the traditional Conservative drive for a limited government as part of a wider attempt to reinvent the state for the “post-bureaucratic age,” with a particular focus on building up the

UNTIL 1997, EVERY LEADER OF THE CONSERVATIVE PARTY FOR MORE THAN A HALF CENTURY HAD BECOME PRIME MINISTER. AFTER THAT YEAR, NONE OF ITS NEXT THREE LEADERS EVEN CAME CLOSE.

role of non-governmental organizations to deliver state services. (Under this “post-bureaucratic” rubric, the Tories became more technology-friendly. Cameron even gave a high-profile speech at the Google Zeitgeist conference.) In other areas, the task was to de-emphasize issues, which vexed activists far more than voters. Cameron didn’t change his position on Europe, for example. He just talked about it less often.

Having found new language with which to communicate older themes and having embraced new policy areas, Cameron picked definitional fights to cement his agenda. These were sometimes inadvertent, as with his decision to drop the party’s longstanding commitment to expanding elite state-funded grammar schools, which were often criticized by the left as being socially divisive and unfair. The decision resulted in massive—and largely unexpected—party infighting that threatened to undermine his leadership. (Cameron also came under pressure during Gordon Brown’s brief honeymoon as Labour leader, a period that ended quickly as Brown decided against calling a snap general election in fall 2007.) Other bust-ups involved traditionally supportive groups. In November 2006, Cameron skipped a speech to the Confederation of British Industry, Britain’s major business lobby group, in favor of making a surprise trip to Iraq. The confederation, feeling snubbed, attacked Cameron for failing to sufficiently support tax cuts and deregulation. “It was a real moment of high drama,” explained one adviser, who works closely with both Cameron and George Osborne. “We had [members of parliament] walking into our office saying, ‘When are you going to drop all this stuff about the environment?’” But retreat would have been both difficult and embarrassing.

Unlike his predecessors, Cameron made such changes a central feature of his leadership, not an add-on. In doing so, he convinced

the voters, the media, and his own party that he meant what he said. But it also meant he couldn’t back down. Having built a new Conservative agenda and image, Cameron had to stick to it.

IN AMERICAN CONSERVATIVE circles, the minor renaissance of its once down-and-out sister party hasn’t gone entirely unnoticed. In *The New York Times* in mid-2008, David Brooks argued, “American conservatives shaped British political thinking. Now the influence is going the other way.” He went on to claim that Cameron’s primary insight was to understand that while “the central political debate of the 20th century was over the role of government ... the central debate of the 21st century is over quality of life.”

But despite earning plaudits from pundits like Brooks, Cameron’s changes have been surprisingly little-observed by American conservative politicians. Republicans used to pay close attention to their British counterparts. Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan developed a bond so close it was compared to a romance. John Major’s relationship with George H.W. Bush was less heady but close enough that Major got caught trying to dig up dirt on Bill Clinton’s student days at Oxford. But in recent years those connections have been much weaker, most notably when Karl Rove told Cameron’s predecessor, Michael Howard, to “forget about meeting the president. Don’t bother coming.” One Cameron adviser told me, “We rarely talk to the Republicans; they just don’t seem interested.”

The second half of Brooks’ assertion, about Cameron’s grasp of the central debate of the 21st century, seems equally questionable. Cameron’s political strategy was conceived and executed long before the credit crunch. He was fond of saying that “Margaret Thatcher in her time realized that the big challenge was reviving Britain’s economy, and we should recognize that the challenge for the modern Conservatives is reviving our society.” But just as Cameron’s claim to be the “heir to Blair” looked dated once Blair left office, his argument that compassionate conservatism means social reform also looks less compelling against the background of the financial meltdown.

The onset of the crisis momentarily dented the conservatives’ double-digit poll lead. Prime Minister Gordon Brown staged a fleeting comeback. Meanwhile commentators and voters alike wondered if a staunchly business-friendly party could respond convincingly to a crisis caused by the flaws of financial capitalism. The answer, in the minds of the British public at least, seems to be a tentative yes: Four months into the crisis, Cameron’s poll lead has gradually risen back to double figures.

Cameron’s promise of a revived conservatism now hangs on whether he, or anyone else on the right, can find a plausible answer to the breakdown of their cherished free market and can find peace with the greater role for government that this implies. But despite the financial crisis, Cameron remains odds-on to become his country’s next leader. If any Republican in the U.S. wants to be in the same position anytime soon, a study trip to London might not be a bad first step. **TAP**

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Twilight of the Autocrats

Will the financial crisis bring down Russia and China?

BY JOSHUA KURLANTZICK

Gansu is one of interior China's most forlorn provinces, one that has gone largely unnoticed by the outside world. When I worked in rural Gansu two years ago, I met few people who had ever left their hometown. In one tiny village, ethnic minority Muslims were eking out a living as farmers in the dusty, arid climate and sleeping in simple stone huts that looked like they'd been built centuries earlier. Most villagers had never met a foreigner before.

Then last fall, Gansu suddenly hit the news. Some 2,000 people rioted in one district, torching cars, smashing up the local Communist Party offices, and attacking policemen with iron rods, chains, and axes in protest of a local government decision that might have forced some of them to resettle.

Gansu isn't the only Chinese province that has erupted in social unrest lately. Taxi drivers have gone on strike in several Chinese cities, people who lost money in illegal fundraising have protested in Beijing, and demonstrators have gathered across the country to demand unpaid back wages. Protest has even spread to the Pearl River Delta, the manufacturing center that abuts Hong Kong, traditionally one of the most prosperous parts of the country. In some years, the Delta's factories have produced 5 percent of all manufactured goods made in the world. But orders for the Delta's products have dried up, and angry factory workers, many owed back pay, have taken to looting warehouses. As these protests turn violent, they could provoke a violent response; Chinese factory owners are increasingly hiring thugs to hit back at demonstrators.

The protests hint at something even bigger than China: The economic downturn has created a profound threat to the autocratic regimes of the world, from China and Russia to Venezuela and the Persian Gulf states. Already, the Russian police have been placed on alert to crack down on demonstrators. Several of Russia's prominent human-rights activists have been killed in recent weeks. Protests, once rare, have spread from eastern Russia to the heart of the Kremlin itself.

Modern autocracies are very different from those of the past. Rather than ruling by strict ideology, ruthless internal police, and tight control of information, authoritarian regimes like Beijing and Moscow have remained in power primarily by making an implicit bargain with their most critical middle-class citizens—you might not have freedom, but you will have money. As long as the broad middle class, which is where the

most dangerous dissent would take hold, is gaining ground economically, the regime is safe.

So while in the West, leaders worry that the global economy faces a second Great Depression, such an economic crisis poses a major threat to some of the world's most resilient autocracies. A strong economy was their only backstop. Now, starved of the growth that keeps them in power and unable to repress their people as old-fashioned dictators did, these autocracies may have nothing left to fall back on.

OVER THE PAST DECADE, authoritarian capitalist countries built impressive economic resumé. China has grown by over 10 percent in most years, and some of its biggest cities, like Shanghai, now boast per-capita incomes of more than \$7,000 per year, the same level as a middle-income nation. Russia, all but bankrupt in the late 1990s, has delivered strong enough growth that it now boasts the third-largest capital reserves in the world and has built its gas companies into such powerhouses that they now dominate the markets of Europe. The authoritarian capitalists proved so successful, in fact, that some in the West began wondering whether their model of development had surpassed liberal democratic capitalism. Israeli political theorist Azar Gat argued in *Foreign Affairs* last year that the most significant challenge to liberal democracy today “emanates from the rise of non-democratic great powers: the West's old Cold War rivals China and Russia, now operating under authoritarian capitalist, rather than communist, regimes.”

Constant growth kept the populations quiet. In Russia, Vladimir Putin promised to save the country from the ruin of the 1990s, a time when Russians enjoyed a more open society but incomes and wages fell sharply. True democracy, he implicitly suggested, might result in disorder in such a large and unwieldy nation. And in return for higher growth rates and greater disposable income, Russians allowed Putin to slowly strangle their freedoms. “Putin does provide stability of sorts, which the middle classes cherish,” says Dmitri Trenin of the Carnegie Endowment's Moscow Center. “Even those [Russians] who oppose authoritarianism in principle fear that the likely alternatives are worse—outright chaos, populist nationalism, much harsher authoritarianism than Putin's.”

In China, the regime made a similar bargain, if not with the masses, at least with its urban middle classes. The regime's investment and largesse was slanted toward the big cities. As Deng

Xiaoping vowed when he opened China's economy, “Some will get rich first”—and those *nouveau riche* would appreciate who paid for their cars, homes, and glittery new mobile phones. In recent years, according to China expert Jonathan Unger, the government has made a deliberate policy of favoring this population.

In a poll by the Pew Research Center, over 80 percent of Chinese said they were satisfied with conditions in their country, among the highest of responses in the world. Even after two terms in office, Vladimir Putin enjoyed popularity ratings that would be the envy of any Western leader. When I traveled across urban, eastern China two years ago asking young Chinese their view of the government, I found what seemed like a striking amount of political inertia among young elites. “We don't have any control over these things,” one middle-class



young woman told me in Shanghai, before asking if I'd seen the latest episodes of *The Wire* on DVD.

THE TRUE TEST OF ANY government, though, comes not in good times but in bad. The autocracies are particularly poorly prepared for a global economic crisis because they have weak domestic consumer markets and rely upon exports to survive. Powerful authoritarian regimes like Russia and the Persian Gulf states are dependent on exports of petroleum or one sole commodity. In Venezuela, energy accounts for some 95 percent of all export revenue. In Iran, it provides some 80 percent of revenues. But the price of oil has dropped by more than half in the past six months. And China, which depends largely on exporting manufactured goods to wealthy nations, will also suffer from the financial crisis as consumer spending drops in the U.S., Europe, and Japan. Exports constitute nearly 35 percent of China's gross domestic product—far too high a figure to be considered a balanced economy. (U.S. exports account for about 10 percent of GDP most years.)

Despite valiant efforts to assure their people that nothing is wrong, the autocrats cannot cover their economic holes. In

Venezuela, Hugo Chavez, after first mocking the financial crisis as a danger to the West, now admits, “The fall in oil prices due to the current global financial crisis may have a negative influence on the economy of Venezuela.” In Russia, where the stock market has fallen by some 70 percent since last spring and the ruble has weathered fierce attacks, Vladimir Putin recently declared he would launch new tax cuts because of the steep drop in Russia's economy. As Stephen Sestanovich of the Council on Foreign Relations notes, “Russia is confronting virtually all the negatives at once—sharply declining export earnings from energy and metals, overleveraged corporate balance sheets and a chorus of bailout appeals, a credit crunch and banking failures, a bursting real-estate bubble.”

While unemployment, poverty, and unrest indicate cracks in



the system of autocracy, there are signs that a nascent movement toward liberal democracy could take its place. Indeed, increasing numbers of Chinese are challenging the government, and in December, 303 Chinese intellectuals signed and published a daring manifesto called Charter 08, which demands an end to one-party rule.

Charter 08 is only one sign that the autocracies are feeling the pressure. In Venezuela, Chavez's allies lost ground to opposition parties in recent regional elections. In Russia, a worried President Dmitri Medvedev recently instructed police to stamp out social unrest caused by the downturn. In December, the police arrested some 100 people at a protest in the poor eastern city of Vladivostok; at roughly the same time, 1,000 people attended a protest in Moscow against the government. Even in the Persian Gulf and Central Asian states, normally some of the quietest parts of the world, the crisis has had political consequences. Kazakh activists have started holding rallies against the government, previously a rare occurrence in the country. Iran, too, faces

Deal Breakers: Russian riot police (left) detain an activist during an anti-Putin protest in Moscow, Jan. 31, 2009. A taxi driver scuffles with Chinese police (right) during a protest in Guangzhou, Nov. 24, 2008.

LEFT: ANATOLI ZHDANOV (UPI), RIGHT: STRINGER (REUTERS) / LANDOV

instability. Inflation in the Islamic Republic is now running near 30 percent, and a powerful cleric mused publicly that the crisis could do “big damage.”

The autocrats clearly are worried. In addition to cracking down on the Charter 08 signers and other activists, Beijing recently announced a stimulus package worth \$586 billion. In Gansu, local officials actually met with the protest leaders and vowed to invest some \$3 billion in the area.

The autocracies have money to burn. China has stockpiled nearly \$2 trillion but is eating it up fast. Russia is spending nearly \$10 billion a week defending the ruble, to little avail, as the value of the currency keeps plummeting. Though they can plow money into their economies, the autocratic leaders cannot make Western consumers shop or guzzle gas and so are powerless to control their major economic engines. And if regimes like Chavez’s try to get their economies under control by cutting government spending, they risk undermining their own power, which was bolstered by government social-welfare programs that often targeted the middle classes whose support they now need.

UNLIKE 20TH-CENTURY AUTOCRATS, such as Fidel Castro, who led their countries in wars of independence, most of today’s leaders came up through the political system and have no revolutionary bona fides to play. The modern authoritarian governments long ago abandoned real ideology. (Chavez is an exception: He has tried to fashion a modern statist ideology he calls the “Bolivarian Revolution.”) China remains a nominally communist country, but if Karl Marx were to visit today, he would be horrified. With policies that favor the urban elite and virtually no social welfare programs left, this “communist” nation has become one of the most unequal societies in Asia.

Lacking any ideology other than sour nationalism, the new autocrats cannot rally their population in down times by appealing to their political idealism, as they did in the 1950s and early 1960s, when ideology kept the government in control during massive famines. And while these nations have sophisticated security apparatuses, their leaders have allowed enough freedom for the economy to grow—which means it’s too late to brainwash their citizens or to create a personality cult like Kim Jong-Il’s in North Korea. Despite Putin’s crack-down on the Russian press, liberal-opposition media outlets are still in business, and average Russians can access most Internet sites.

In order to improve their standing on the world stage, today’s autocrats at least try to create the facade of democracy. Their people know about democratic movements in other countries, can access free media, and are not easily subdued. Because the authoritarian governments have created some semblance of a legal system, workers have begun to think they have rights. Compared to the 1980s, when word of demonstrations in China was passed from person to person, today middle-class demonstrators organize by text message, and news of protests

quickly appears on Chinese blogs. Chinese and foreign reporters can also follow protests, making it harder for the security forces to get away with a real crackdown.

Neither the short term nor the long term looks good for Moscow, Beijing, and the other autocrats. In the near future, their economies will slow down severely and, in the case of Russia, likely fall into a serious recession. In China, many analysts believe unemployment will rise to its highest level in a decade. Growth is likely to dip below 8 percent, the magic number needed to keep creating enough jobs for all the people entering the work force in China.

Millions of Chinese migrant workers who can no longer find factory jobs will return to the interior of the country. Back in rural areas, anger is already rising. These unemployed workers, who have seen the wealth of urban elites in cities like Shanghai, could begin organizing larger demonstrations, smashing

up local Communist Party offices and even attacking local officials. Middle-class protests are likely to rise as well—over issues of government competence like safety, land prices, and land evictions. Since the urbanites have media connections, they are able to get their stories onto Chinese blogs and news sites. Recently, parents of Chinese children who were made ill or died from tainted milk gathered together to push the government for better health care, refusing the regime’s attempts to essentially buy them off. (The government recently sentenced two people to death for playing a key role in the tainted-milk scandal.)

Thus far, the autocracies have kept groups of people with grievances against the government from forming united fronts. Moscow has achieved this through the skillful use of nationalism, which drives a wedge between liberal Russians and ethnic minorities with grievances against the government. Beijing has used a combination of crackdowns and payoffs to top demonstrators to keep labor protests separate from one another, preventing them from developing a common theme or common leaders.

Divide and conquer, though, won’t work forever. In China, rural and urban protests might soon begin to link up—through activist networks, religious groups, or blogs—and form a national protest. Charter 08 and a nationwide taxi-driver strike, both organized on the Internet, are a first hint of this nationwide movement.

The Great Depression fed dangerous new autocratic ideologies like fascism and communism; a second Great Depression could destroy them. While the economic crisis will cause untold human suffering in these and other countries, it is quite possible that, on the other side of it, we will see the end of that distinctive phenomenon of the late 1990s and early 21st century: the growth autocracy. And that, at least, would bring some light to a financial dark age. **TAP**

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Culture & Books

“Aside from the extraordinary arc that took them to the White House, most of the parallels between Lincoln and Obama are misleading.”

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Environmental Marvel, Design Nightmare: The Olympic Village under construction for the 2010 Winter Games in Vancouver, B.C.

ARCHITECTURE

GREEN BUILDING BLUES

Is “well-designed green architecture” an oxymoron?

BY KRISTON CAPPS

THE OLYMPIC VILLAGE IN VANCOUVER will be a marvel of the 21st century once it is complete. Currently under construction for the 2010 Winter Olympics, the 1.4-million-square-foot, 16-building Village will be outfitted with passive solar panels and green roofs and heated by a recycling apparatus that captures the heat emitted by sewage and redirects it back to the residences. Every building in the complex is designed to outlast its temporary use, and every building is made with its long-term carbon footprint in mind. For its efforts to leave no good turn unrecycled, the Olympic Village is hauling home enough Leadership in Energy and

Environmental Design (LEED) gold and platinum medals to make an Olympic contender green with envy.

Yet for all its lauded environmental ingenuity, Vancouver’s Olympic Village has limited ambitions when it comes to design innovation. Despite assurances from Village project manager Hank Jasper that “you don’t need sod walls and 30-foot trees on the roof to make it sustainable,” the project’s higher-ups rejected ambitious architectural designs for fear that they did not look green enough. Renowned postmodernist architect Robert A.M. Stern was originally chosen to lead the project, but his proposed design for the waterfront com-

munity center and other sites met with significant resistance from Vancouver. The city’s senior urban designer, Scot Hein, declared to *The Vancouver Sun* that Stern’s design was “not expressive of sustainability.” Stern, the dean of architecture at Yale University, was asked to leave the project, and a locally based architecture firm, Arthur Erickson Corporation, was hired in his place. But Erickson, too, was given neither the time nor the mandate to pursue lofty design goals. “There’s not much play there,” Erickson partner Nick Milkovich told *The Globe and Mail* in January 2007.

With function prized above all else, the Olympic Village building designs have a default “green” look to them: blocky, all glass, covered in matted foliage. It looks as though the developers simply forgot to design the place.

The field of architecture is experiencing a design crisis, with clients ranging from private owners to cities demanding that architects prioritize sustainability above all else—as if design itself were an

obnoxious carbon-emitter. This is partly because high designers and the so-called “starchitects,” who fear that new methods and materials might not comport with long-established styles, are not taking the lead on sustainability issues, leaving green innovation to younger firms with fewer resources. Both well-known firms and up-and-comers lack experience in working with new, often expensive green materials, which has forced many designers to depend greatly on singular and design-restrictive tactics such as “passive design”—essentially, lots of space and windows—to achieve sustainability goals.

As a result, much green architecture reflects a quality that Ford’s Edsel possessed: It looks like the future, but it doesn’t look good.

ONE REASON THAT EMERGING GREEN architects and their clients have come to see design as part of the problem is that the most lauded design projects in recent history have made virtually no attempt at sustainability. “Look at the architecture of the last 15 years,” says James Wines, a professor of architecture at Penn State University and the author of *Green Architecture*. “It’s been more flamboyant and more wasteful than it’s ever been before. To build any of these buildings by Frank Gehry, it takes, what, 60 to 80 percent more metal and steel and construction than it would to enclose that space in a normal way. So you’re talking about incredible waste. Mind-boggling waste.”

As “green” becomes an increasingly valuable term to associate with any new building, architectural projects are claiming the label, whether or not they have paid attention to sustainability. “They say, ‘Oh, the Getty Museum, Richard Meier, environmental,’” Wines says. But the Getty “carved out half a mountain and flew in all that travertine. Can you imagine the amount of trees and gallons of fossil fuels it took to fly in all that marble? It’s insane.”

So-called “green washing” has contributed to both the hype and the shoddy design standards associated with green building. Though the advent of formal



Being Green: The Genzyme building in Cambridge, Mass., and its interior atrium (right).

certification processes like LEED has cut back instances of out-and-out fraud, green-washing has no doubt devalued the currency of the term “green” and often obscures more complex conceptual problems. Developers in Florida, for example, have taken to recycling shipping containers to create affordable homes, only to plop them into carbon-inefficient suburban communities without retrofitting them in a way that is energy efficient. Shuhei Endo’s Slowtexture M arena in Japan is similarly problematic. Its natural lighting and trendy sod exterior may make up for the energy-inefficient steel in the skeleton, but insulation can’t offset the carbon emissions of sports fans driving to its isolated location outside the Kobe suburbs.

Architects are divided on what constitutes a truly sustainable building. Transporting efficient materials long distances to build green is a problem in the eyes of architects like Wines, who thinks about materials in the way that Alice Waters does about food. “It’s better to build with what you have in Pittsburgh”—that is, steel—“than to import the wood from Seattle,” Wines says. This approach emphasizes a regional, integrated standard for sustainability that might not adhere to the materials-based focus of LEED certification—a ribbon that green



MIKE CHAMPION / GRAYSKY
CREATIVE COMMONS

architects know they need to pin to their projects. Confounding the matter is the nature of new materials and strategies, which call for study and experimentation beyond the means of many firms, no matter how enthusiastic they may be. Established architects—those with the most resources—often prefer to let their brand drive their work, green materials be damned.

Stefan Behnisch is a German architect whose firm, Behnisch, Behnisch & Partner, is best known in the United States

for the Cambridge, Massachusetts, headquarters of the biotech firm Genzyme—a dazzling, LEED-platinum-certified building with 12 light-filled stories of open atrium. He is critical of other big-name architects who resist going green. “Established firms like to do stuff the way they always have done it. They are not flexible. They are corporate quality plans, and they don’t allow innovation. It took them very long to catch on.”

But those name-brand firms still exclusively focused on formalist innovation look increasingly isolated on their fake islands in Dubai. The field’s high stylists prefer materials like titanium—an environmental abomination. Further, they often use quite immodest amounts of these materials to enclose a space. The architectural style that persists among

Name-brand architecture firms still exclusively focused on formalist innovation look increasingly isolated on their fake islands in Dubai.

the very top performers is Baroque and epic at a time when the rest of the field—the rest of the world—is turning to questions of content (in other words, a building’s purpose). Those questions are largely about sustainability, an issue on which architectural leaders refuse to lead. “Architecture has so many bad habits that it can’t change easily,” Wines says. “I think most architects are terribly threatened by the green movement. Because God forbid they have to change the style. What if any one of us leading stylists had to change their style simply because you can’t build with that material any more?”

In recent projects, Behnisch has managed to deviate from the orthogonal unit that drives green architecture, allowing for curved, organic features and other ornamental elements. This is no mean feat: Thermal glass, which keeps in heat more efficiently, does not curve readily. Behnisch says that information about new materials represents the biggest lag on design progress within the field. “In the early ’90s, when we first started out, we had to do a lot of research,” he

says. Today, many of Behnisch’s clients—including the Catholic Church, which he describes as the most demanding green client in the world—arrive at the table well versed in new materials and building methods. One of Behnisch’s frequent haunts is a meta-architectural research firm in Stuttgart that focuses exclusively on studying new materials.

Wines, for one, has faith in architects’ ability to adapt. “There’s a lot of materials that are very, very good from an ecological perspective,” he says. “You learn to invent with those.”

BEHNISCH THINKS IT IS INEVITABLE that green architecture will grow out of its awkward stage. “[Green building] will inform the architectural development,” he says. “It’s still content-driven.

We have a new topic—a new and very interesting topic—to inform the architecture. Once we marshal the subject to its own formalistic approach, the design will move architecture further, but it is still developing.”

What might finally bridge the gap between design and environmentalism is the realization that good design is also good for the environment. “If it isn’t art, it’s not sustainable, because who’s going to keep ugly buildings around?” Wines asks. Sustainability could be considered the broader architectural framework into which green architecture fits. As Behnisch told *Metropolis* magazine in December, “I never saw a discrepancy between design and sustainability. I always felt that sustainability could drive architectural form.”

When sustainable architecture coalesces into something more like art, it will likely be more in keeping with a world teetering on the brink of economic and environmental collapse than with the architectural modes that preceded it. Further, the sustainable school may well dial back the lessons of globalization, pre-

ferring instead to adopt a new regionalism and to find virtue in the frugal rather than in the profligate, expressing these preferences through design. Wines sees the very real potential for a fundamental re-imagining of what architecture means, the sort of revolutionary revision that took place when Le Corbusier introduced the International Style. “The idea of a building as a piece of sculpture is 100 years old now,” Wines says. “It’s been done over and over and over. It’s not very progressive as a premise.”

These questions are finding an audience beyond the world of architecture, as President Barack Obama has signaled a moment for action unrivaled since Franklin Roosevelt’s Works Progress Administration.

“What I’ve seen thus far and have been excited about is the recognition of the role that the built environment plays in issues such as climate change, issues such as energy security,” says Tom Hicks, vice president of international policy and programs for the U.S. Green Building Council. He tickets the built environment (primarily buildings, but all man-made surroundings) for 39 percent of the nation’s carbon emissions. “There’s a huge opportunity for us to turn that back.”

While the starchitect class has all but entrenched itself in an opulent style out of sync with the rather serious issues facing humans and our environment, emerging architects are taking solace in green architecture. Determining just what sustainability in architecture means is bound to yield the same innovation in design that the Industrial Revolution did for the modernist style.

From the academy to the builder, green architecture—and the long-term promise of sustainability—is an opportunity for workers to profit and for designers to make a name. In the long term, it dares to marry the built and natural environments, the standoff at the heart of the architectural dialogue between man and nature. And perhaps sooner rather than later, it will produce some buildings we can grow to love. **TAP**

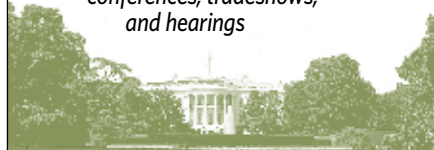
Kriston Capps is an art critic living in Washington, D.C.

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BOOKS

AGONIES OF THE TWITTERATI

ELSEWHERE, U.S.A.: HOW WE GOT FROM THE COMPANY MAN, FAMILY DINNERS, AND THE AFFLUENT SOCIETY TO THE HOME OFFICE, BLACKBERRY MOMS, AND ECONOMIC ANXIETY BY DALTON CONLEY, Pantheon, 221 pages, \$24.00

BY ANN SWIDLER

THE CRITICS OF MODERNITY, GOING back at least to the 19th century, have told us that modern society is hurtling forward, its social ties unraveling behind it, its citizens left unhinged and bewildered. In recent decades, disintegration has remained a persistent image in popular social criticism, from Alvin Toffler's *Future Shock* and Philip Slater's *The Pursuit of Loneliness* (both published in 1970) to more current entrants such as Judith Warner's 2005 book *Perfect Madness: Motherhood in the Age of Anxiety*. And now comes the sociologist Dalton Conley tapping into the same trope and, like many before him, presenting the crisis of contemporary society as bearing most sharply, indeed almost exclusively, on the privileged.

The trouble with this long tradition, and particularly with Conley's rendition of it, is that the evidence doesn't support the view that modernity has disoriented all groups in society, much less that it has peculiarly shaken up the privileged. Despite the pervasive image of a post-modern self, fragmented and fractured, the educated have found new ways to knit their lives together. It is the less educated, squeezed on every front, whose lives have become more insecure and unstable in both work and family life.

A professor at New York University, Conley has important articles and books to his credit, and much of his work deals critically with social inequality. His *Being Black, Living in the Red* is a substantial study of the sources and consequences of racial differences in wealth. *The Pecking Order: Which Siblings Succeed and Why* is an intriguing analysis of the limited role of genes and family background in accounting for achievement, highlighting instead the role of luck, accident, and the inability of parents with many

children to provide opportunities to all of them.

In contrast to his earlier work, however, *Elsewhere, U.S.A.* is a disjointed dervish of a book that embodies its author's diagnosis of modern life. It is frenetic, disorganized, marred by leaps of logic and digressions galore. Its saving grace is that it challenges us to understand how contemporary social transformations affect the realms of personal life: love, friendships, the sense of self. But to grasp those connections, we have to pay attention to facts that Conley dismisses or ignores.

Amid a welter of kvetchy asides (Conley hates advertisements on movie screens, logos on T-shirts, and people who yak on their cell phones in public), *Elsewhere, U.S.A.* offers two big concepts to diagnose modern society's ills: the "elsewhere" society, and the "intravidual." "Mrs. and Mr. Elsewhere," workaholic professionals, always feel they should be somewhere else than where they currently are, and so they betray those around them as their mind races ahead to the next encounter, or they look around for a more desirable interaction. The intravidual is the reciprocal of this dissociated society: Rather than an integrated self, the modern person is internally fragmented.

Along with these two big concepts, Conley emphasizes four forces that drive contemporary social change. New technologies create a 24/7, sped-up work life that continuously intrudes on family time. Growing income inequality makes those near the top envious and insecure, leading them to work ever harder. Women's participation in paid work erodes community life, breaks down the boundary between work and leisure, and strains families. And the networked society permits an almost infinite number of selves—virtual and

actual—as people participate in multiple communities of varying depth and reality, from the anonymous others who "recommend" films on Netflix, to friends of friends on Facebook, to the avatars in virtual social universes.

Conley is frank enough to acknowledge many inconvenient facts that deviate from this picture. For example, today's parents, despite dual careers, actually spend more time with their children than did those of the 1950s. Has residential mobility risen? No, it has decreased throughout the past century. Although divorce spiked after the 1960s, marriage has stabilized for the college-educated. And jobs "have actually gotten broader" as routine tasks are left to computers. (Conley might also have acknowledged that no one has shown that friendships mediated by online communication are any less real or gratifying than those of the pre-IM-Facebook-MySpace era.) But he then goes on as if his original assertions are self-evident: "Upper-class jet-setters may do business across the globe, but they are increasingly rooted in their home lives. The reason? Certainly not domestic bliss, as we well know." And that's it. Evidence that the marriages of the well-educated have become dramatically more stable—and probably more blissful—than those of the less educated is sloughed off with a flip aside.

Persistent weaknesses undercut the potential value of this book. It is peppered throughout with "perhaps" and "might," a self-conscious signal of its thin, fragmentary evidence. In an apologetic note, Conley says, "This is not social science as I practice it in my day job, replete with falsifiable hypotheses, experimental methods, and the like. This is social criticism, and as such the real test lies with you, dear reader: Does what I argued in these pages strike you as spot on? Could I have been spying on your life or the lives of folks you know and interact with daily? ... In short, do I make sense?"

The book's claim to "make sense" relies not on its scattershot evidence but on its ubiquitous "you" and "we." Since the book was written before the economic collapse, it doesn't contemplate plain-old economic distress as a problem. It does

highlight growing economic inequality, but from the perspective of those at the top of the heap. Conley worries about such difficulties as "feeling guilty that as a professional I make so much more than the average McDonald's worker." The "you" addressed in *Elsewhere, U.S.A.* is enviably successful, probably divorced, juggling multiple careers and complex social networks, affluent enough to purchase every personal service, and constantly driven by anxieties about status and substance. In an information and service economy, where professionals often produce "intangibles" like psychotherapy or legal advice, "our own worth is therefore elusive, too. Anxiety about that worth is thus a rational response, as is our suspicion that we may be frauds." One is tempted to ask, "What do you mean by 'we,' Dalton?"

The jacket flap notes that Conley is not only a professor at NYU but also its acting dean for the social sciences, with appoint-

are responsible for repairs and upkeep ("when you rent, you don't have to think twice before pouring some glob down the drain") and homes become "potential profit (and loss) center[s]," eroding the boundary between work and home. His misanthropy sometimes reads like parody, as when he notes that "kids, after all, reflect our class status more than any other marker. ... No, it's not enough to be head of the company; you have to be that *and* show the world that you have invested enough hours at home that your kids get into Princeton."

Most disconcerting are various riffs—some autobiographical—that purportedly illustrate common dilemmas. He describes, for example, his "fraud anxiety" when his waiter at an upscale restaurant turns out to be an old college friend: "At the end of the meal we exchanged numbers, I left a whopping tip, and then decided I would never return to that restaurant despite the fact that the food was

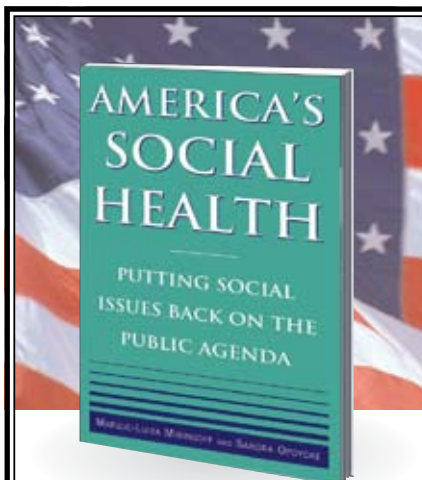
The evidence doesn't support the view that modernity has disoriented all groups in society, much less that it has peculiarly shaken up the privileged.

ments at its Wagner School of Public Service, the Mount Sinai School of Medicine, and the National Bureau of Economic Research. He offers anecdotes about his professionally successful, globe-trotting wife and their two children. Whew! No wonder he claims, "Many Americans—particularly those with children to take care of—have morphed into a hyperactive people constantly shuttling between where we think we have to be (home? work? the party full of potential clients?) and where we think we should be (the country for a weekend with the kids? with this husband or a new one?)."

Even more irritating than Conley's projection of his life onto the reader's is his seeming determination to give the most dismal interpretation of the trends and putative individual motives he describes. The increase in homeownership, he speculates, may not only keep unhappy couples together but may cause anxiety because homeowners

fabulous." While the anecdote supposedly illustrates the effects of "an increasingly unequal service economy," it seems cruel and idiosyncratic (especially since his friend, who had "congratulated me on the publication of my books" might easily read this one).

What would a more careful analysis of contemporary social changes reveal (leaving aside the current economic meltdown)? First, both globalization and technological change have made education the dominant line of cleavage in contemporary society, with effects not just on economic opportunity but on many other aspects of life. Second, the educated—and here the yawning gap is between the approximately 25 percent of Americans with four-year college degrees and those with no more than a high school diploma—marry much later and have fewer children and are much less likely to break up with a spouse and become single parents. Third, while families have



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increased their total work hours as they try to compensate for stagnant wages, the sense of a more harried family life among the educated probably comes from rising standards for how much nurturance children require—concerns that have been stimulated by intensified competition for a limited number of college places. These nuanced realities would need to be the basis for any serious analysis of the way contemporary social forces impinge on family, child-rearing, and intimacy, but perhaps they lack the flamboyant drama that makes a best-seller.

Elsewhere, U.S.A. fails to analyze the sources of personal insecurity and family instability among the less educated, who have borne the true brunt of the growing "risk society," and it never addresses the policies that might soften inequality (greater public investments in education, especially higher education, would

make sense here). It is true that modern technologies and relationships allow each member of a family to optimize his or her own pursuits (a sport or activity for each child, and each parent with a career, friends, and avocations), but it is not clear that this increase in choice undermines the intimacy, or even the commitment, that we seek from our personal relationships. It would be hard to develop a realistic, progressive social agenda to understand or remedy any of these problems from the pastiche offered in *Elsewhere, U.S.A.* If you want that understanding, look somewhere else. **TAP**

Ann Swidler, professor of sociology at the University of California, Berkeley, is the author of Talk of Love and co-author of Habits of the Heart. Her recent work on AIDS in Africa has appeared in Science and other publications.

BOOKS

A LITTLE LIBERAL PERSUASION

ANGELS AND AGES: A SHORT BOOK ABOUT DARWIN, LINCOLN, AND MODERN LIFE BY ADAM GOPNIK, Alfred A. Knopf, 211 pages, \$24.95

BY DANIEL T. RODGERS

THE 200TH ANNIVERSARY OF Abraham Lincoln's birth is upon us, and the flood of Lincoln books has begun to crest. At least a dozen Lincoln books were released on Presidents' Day weekend. Meanwhile, the Obama camp has played heavily on Lincoln parallels since the campaign began. Conservative columnists chide that if Obama were really to act Lincoln's part, he would reach at once toward a bipartisan political center.

In fact, aside from the extraordinary arc that took them to the White House, most of the parallels between Lincoln and Obama are misleading. Lincoln worked hard to cajole the border states to stay within the Union, but he was no compromiser in 1860. As secession fever consumed the Deep South in the months before his inauguration, and others struggled to forge a grand compromise that

would hold the Union together, Lincoln quashed any retreat from the Republican Party's platform principles. The famous "we are not enemies, but friends" paragraph that closed his Inaugural Address was inserted at the suggestion of William Seward, who thought Lincoln's original text too argumentative. Lincoln preferred to let a terrible war come, if it should, than to compromise on the perpetuity of the Union or the principle that the territories must be preserved from slavery.

Adam Gopnik's *Angels and Ages* springs from the coincidence that Lincoln was born on the same day as that other giant figure of the century, Charles Darwin. The year of John Brown's raid on the Harpers Ferry arsenal, the year in which Lincoln began his bid for the presidential nomination, was the year in which *On The Origin of Species* was published. Around these intertwined lives, Gopnik

has constructed an elegant, widely ranging book of essays, many of which began as pieces in *The New Yorker*. Gopnik does not write with his eye directly on the political present, but *Angels and Ages* tells us more than he might have realized about the timidity of democratic liberalism after three decades of Republican political domination.

What Lincoln and Darwin had most in common, Gopnik argues, was a style of persuasion. Despite the enormous gulf between Lincoln's childhood and Darwin's comfortably sheltered one, they were both avid readers and deeply serious writers. Lincoln's métier was the law case, the close, reasoned argument that, until one gets to Seward's part, framed Lincoln's first Inaugural and the studious inelegance of the Emancipation Proclamation. Darwin's style was that of natural observation: the mountains of precisely observed detail through which he built the argument for species change through natural selection. Revolutionary in their impact, they both consciously eschewed the grand oratorical style. Lincoln's quotable passages are deeply memorable, but there are not nearly as many of them as one might imagine. Darwin famously put his most radical ideas in the most cautious language.

"They were nearsighted visionaries," Gopnik writes. "They particularized in everything." They preferred to write with small words than with overblown ones, to reason rather than to orate, to show the cosmos "in a tea bag" rather than, like Walt Whitman, yawp about it from the rooftops. In doing this, he argues, they invented a new language for liberal democracy: a new "liberal eloquence." To come on that language, on the heels of John Brown's mad, revolutionary rhetoric, is to find yourself at "a true fault line in modern consciousness."

The new style went hand in hand, Gopnik argues, with affection for bourgeois virtues. Both men were devotees of domestic life. Though they had thought as much as any two persons in the mid-19th century about the massive presence of death, that did not prevent either from grieving, with almost unhinging agony, over the deaths of their children. Neither

man found comfort in the conventional religious solace of the day. Darwin had dethroned God from any directing hand in creation; Lincoln, who began as a religious skeptic, found his way back by his second Inaugural to a God whose intentions could not be fathomed. They were moderns, Gopnik argues, who could no longer conceive of life vertically and hierarchically but only along the particular-filled horizontals of time.

In all this, Gopnik writes, they helped invent liberal democracy's true language: modest, down to earth, scientific, proceduralistic. "Tini-ness is the point," he writes of Darwin, just as legal technicality is Lincoln's point. He urges us to find the power in the long, tedious opening section of Lincoln's Cooper Institute address in which he traced out every recorded vote of every one of the Constitution's signers on the question of slavery in the territories. He would have us recognize *The Formation of Vegetable Mould, through the Action of Worms with Observations on their Habits* as the truest of Darwin's books.

John Brown—the man of utopian visions and transcendentalist admirers—haunts Gopnik's imagination in these passages, but it's hard not to think that George W. Bush and Jerry Falwell do, too. A sense of science as endangered by armies assembled in blind faith; an uneasiness with higher-law doctrines of preemptive war and legitimate torture; a skepticism about crusading rhetoric of every sort: all this saturates the mood of *Angels and Ages* and helps drive it back toward the small and precise. Where the big words and grand aspirations have been misappropriated so often, what else is democratic liberalism to do but regroup on the plain of precision, science, and competence?

In truth, Lincoln and Darwin were as caught up in big ideas as any of their contemporaries were. Lincoln's belief

in the perpetuity of the Union cannot be unhitched from the powerful tides of romantic nationalism that swept through the 19th century. His belief that the Declaration of Independence had enshrined an anti-slavery premise in the nation's very founding was as much a product of higher-law faith as was the Southern slaveholders' conviction that secession remained a legitimate option because of the declaration's insistence on government by consent.

Darwin, for his part, could not but breathe the assumptions of progress that saturated mid-19th-century England. Racism of any form "had no place either in Darwin's life or in Darwin's logic," Gopnik writes; nor did Social Darwinism. But that is not so. For all Darwin's generosity of mind and his extended rebuttal to the thesis that the races of mankind were the result of distinct and separate creations,

Darwin had no qualms about differentiating between savage and civilized races, or in assuming, like most of his Euro-American contemporaries, that in the course of progress the civilized would eventually exterminate the savage. He worried about the dis-eugenic consequences of his age's charitable sentiments even as he recognized the progression in moral power. He did not go nearly as far as Lincoln did when pressed on the point by Stephen Douglas in defending white supremacy, but neither did Darwin write off the skull-measuring experiments of the notorious racist, Samuel Morton. To wring out of either man their absorption in 19th-century liberal democracy's big moral ideals of nation, liberty, and progress (however flawed and partial) is to sketch only a cautious shadow.

Gopnik writes with an elegant sense for the past. His pursuit of the conflicting accounts of Edwin Stanton's words at Lincoln's death (from which the "angels"



FRAME: MARC DIETRICH / FOTOLIA

in his title derives) is an example of the historical method at its best. But he is pre-Darwinian in his historical sensibilities. He thinks something essential had turned by the time Lincoln’s and Darwin’s life ended, that the obvious truths of 1809, when they were born, had been swept away. The modern condition had arrived and with it (though it would take time for people to catch up to the fact), the language it needed.

Yet if history gives us only a continuous tangle of ways of thinking about the world, then finding the language for liberal democracy is not so simple. To mobilize an immensely diverse and anxious people at liberalism’s current moment will take a vocabulary of civic aspirations as big, as

justice-infused, and as morally charged as any of the words in the conservative word bank. One of the most striking things about Obama has been the way he has managed to combine (though not without tension) a technocratic ambition for decent, competent government with a liberal aspiration for a new civic and moral culture. Gopnik makes a thoughtful case for a language of smallness. But it would be a tragedy if, at this juncture, Lincoln were to come down only to this. **TAP**

Daniel T. Rodgers, the Henry Charles Lea Professor of History at Princeton University, is the author of Contested Truths: Keywords in American Politics Since Independence.

BOOKS

WHY THEY FOUGHT

HEROES AND COWARDS: THE SOCIAL FACE OF WAR BY DORA L. COSTA AND MATTHEW E. KAHN, Princeton University Press, 315 pages, \$27.95

BY ROBERT MACKEY

THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR HAS long been a staple of the publishing industry. Hundreds of books come out each year, ranging from yet another biography of Robert E. Lee to “drums and bugles” hard-core military histories of specific battles and campaigns. Very few break new ground or bring to light any new discoveries, and even fewer have any relevance beyond the four years of fratricidal homicide. Dora L. Costa and Matthew E. Kahn’s *Heroes and Cowards* is a rarity—a book about the Civil War on its surface but with application well outside the conflict.

Literary classics such as *The Red Badge of Courage* and a number of modern historical studies—notably the works on the common soldier by Bell Wiley and James McPherson—have attempted to grapple with the question of why some soldiers fight and die, while others run away. This is the core question in *Heroes and Cowards*. More generally, Costa and Kahn want to know what makes people, especially in highly dangerous and

stressful environments—for example, in prisoner-of-war camps as well as on the battlefield—coalesce as unified groups or break apart.

Using the huge amount of data available on soldiers in the Union Army during the war—their sample includes the records of nearly 35,000 white men and 6,000 black men—Costa and Kahn gain important insights on why soldiers, both black and white, stood with their companies and died in rates that matched, and often surpassed, the worst battles of World War I. The study is based on company-sized units of approximately 100 men, with 10 to 12 companies forming a regiment, which was the basic fighting unit of the war. These companies were raised from local communities, organized into state-sponsored regiments, and then sent to war. For example, most of the 5th New York Volunteer Infantry, “Duryee’s Zouaves,” came from Manhattan, with the exception of one company from Poughkeepsie. Black troops were recruited and organized somewhat differ-

ently, either forming federal “U.S. Colored Troops” or state-sponsored regiments, though in both cases companies were also raised locally whenever possible. This system helped to bind soldiers together, as they understood that they and their families would face communal condemnation if they deserted and returned home. In fact, as Costa and Kahn show, unless they came from a region that was anti-war and anti-Lincoln, deserters were likely not to return home at all or to move quickly to another region.

The main argument of the book is that people are more loyal to a group when placed with others who share their socioeconomic, cultural, and ethnic background. In the Union army, it was common for Irish or German troops to serve in regiments separate from the native-born. However much we may now disapprove of ethnic segregation, the effect on group cohesion should not be disparaged. Units organized by ethnic group, despite heavy casualties, ended the war with lower desertion rates than those of diverse units that never heard a shot fired in anger. The famous Irish Brigade led by Fenian firebrand Thomas Francis Meagher started with five full regiments of Irish volunteers in 1861 and fought without breaking ranks even though combat losses reduced them to a single regiment by late 1863. All-black regiments like the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, made famous by the movie *Glory*, suffered similarly catastrophic losses. The authors find that a mix of free African Americans and former slaves resulted in a higher rate of desertions but provided other substantial benefits, such as increased literacy after the war. In other words, black soldiers who had been slaves gained personally from fighting by the side of literate free-men, but the units themselves suffered from less cohesion.

How soldiers’ lives changed after the war is one of the strongest parts of *Heroes and Cowards*. Using U.S. Census Bureau data and veterans’ records, which provide information about income, occupation, and residence, Costa and Kahn track thousands of former Union soldiers in the decades after the war. A simple

fact quickly emerges. If soldiers deserted but came from an area that was generally anti-war (that is, an area that voted for the “peace” candidate in the 1864 presidential election, Democrat George McClellan), they tended to return home and stay. But if deserters came from a region that was pro-Lincoln in 1864, their odds of moving away from their home community after returning nearly tripled. The causal relationship between

The regimental colors, given to the men by their wives, sisters, and daughters, became not only a symbol of their honor but of communal expectations.

anti- or pro-war feelings and the chance that a deserter would move quickly and far from the community led the authors to a definite and persuasive conclusion: Community and group mores and expectations, those same factors that made the volunteer units cohesive in war, acted as a means of punishment for those who failed to uphold, in the Victorian Era idiom, “their manly duties.”

Overall, *Heroes and Cowards* is an excellent study, with only a few oversights. Costa and Kahn pass over the intangibles of warfare in the Civil War era, such as the influence of tactics, unit esprit de corps, and other relatively nonquantifiable concepts. The linear tactics of the time, where soldiers stood in long battle lines, shoulder-to-shoulder, did much to reinforce soldiers’ cohesion. They rarely ran from the battle line. Deserters usually escaped on the march to the battle, when the opportunity to fall out of the unit was easiest. Soldiers of the era tended to stand and fight until the entire unit fled, was ordered to withdraw, or fell in battle. Examples such as the virtual annihilation of the 5th New York Infantry at Second Manassas in August 1862—where the 525-man force suffered 110 killed and nearly 300 wounded in 10 minutes—abounded in the war. As the authors duly note, the locally formed companies added a strong factor to unit cohesion, especially when combined with the relatively immobile nature of American life in the 19th century.

Costa and Kahn also pass over other intangibles, such as the almost religious devotion to a regiment’s flag, referred to in writings of the period as “the colors.” It’s striking that many of the Medals of Honor awarded in the Civil War were for either capturing enemy flags or saving one’s own; losing a flag in battle was considered the greatest dishonor. Unit devotion to the regimental flags does, however, support Costa and Kahn’s cen-

tral thesis—nearly all of the volunteer regiments, especially those raised in the first year of the war, were given their colors by the local communities. In other words, the wives, sisters, and daughters of the men of the regiment gave them the flags under which they would fight and die. The regimental colors became not only a symbol of a regiment’s honor but, in the view of Kahn and Costa, also a visible reminder of communal support and expectations.

In short, rather than just being about war, *Heroes and Cowards* is about the costs and benefits of community-based organization. While it is an interesting cliometric analysis of the Union Army, it is just as provocative to consider its modern implications. The factors that made Civil War companies, white or black, cohesive groups are the same factors that must be considered when community groups, political and social movements, and even terrorist organizations are formed today. This is social-science history with broad relevance, well worth the attention of anyone—layperson or scholar—who is curious about the commitments that lead people to put their lives on the line. **TAP**

Robert Mackey, formerly assistant professor of history at the United States Military Academy, is a consultant at the National Counterterrorism Center in Washington, D.C., and writes extensively on military history.



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Practical Liberalism Redux

BY E. J. DIONNE JR.

LAST OCTOBER, AFTER THE ECONOMY'S DOWNWARD spiral became obvious, I closed an e-mail to a friend with the words: "I never thought my obsession with the 1930s would ever be relevant to my life." That obsession had many roots, not the least being that my hometown of

Fall River, Massachusetts, was a '30s kind of place with a '30s kind of culture, a '30s kind of economy, and '30s-style New Deal politics. But if there is a single person who inspired my fascination with an era, it is the historian William E. Leuchtenburg.

I can't remember which of two inspiring high school history teachers, Jim Garman or Norm Hess, gave me Leuchtenburg's *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal: 1932-1940*. Rereading it recently, I was reminded of the excitement I felt at age 15 over the realization that a graceful writer could bring politics to life. Leuchtenburg's version of FDR launched my teenage journey toward a practical kind of liberalism.

And my latest reading underscored the point that our times really do bear an uncanny resemblance to the 1930s, and Barack Obama's opportunities are quite like those seized by Franklin Roosevelt.

Consider, first, how the urgencies of the Depression swept aside the 1920s culture wars over prohibition. Leuchtenburg cites a letter written to FDR's political maestro Jim Farley observing how ridiculous it was "for a jobless wet Democrat to wrangle with a jobless dry Democrat over liquor when neither could afford the price of a drink." One can imagine our current economic distress having a comparable impact on disputes over, say, gay marriage.

Also striking is how the discrediting of the leading economic classes followed the same form, then and now. "Throughout the 1920s," Leuchtenburg writes, "publicists had trumpeted one never-ending

refrain: that the prosperity of the decade had been produced by the genius of businessmen. If businessmen had caused prosperity, who but they must be responsible for the depression."

You wonder if our Congress will launch a probe along the lines of the 1930s Senate investigation of Wall Street led by Ferdinand Pecora. "Pecora revealed that the most respected men on Wall Street had rigged pools, had profited by pegging bond prices artificially high, and had lined their pockets with fantastic bonuses," Leuchtenburg writes. "The bankers seemed bereft of a sense of obligation even to their own institutions."

But what gives this book its power is Leuchtenburg's brilliant portrait of FDR, his administration, and how they got so much done, so fast. The anecdotes, the revelatory quotations, the pen portraits of Roosevelt's friends and enemies, are put to the service of a shrewdly analytical account that balances the role of Roosevelt himself, the force of social movements, and the exigencies of circumstance.

Leuchtenburg does not quite buy the "great man" theory of history—he gives proper due to the unions and the agitators and the interest groups. Yet he is right that FDR was the essential inspiration, thanks to his "ability to arouse the country and, more specifically, the men who served under him by his breezy encouragement

of experimentation, by his hopefulness and—a word that would have embarrassed some of his lieutenants—by his idealism."

Leuchtenburg's account is also helpful in sorting out the false debate over whether Obama is more progressive or more pragmatic. FDR was the subject of the same misleading argument because he was both. "The New Deal," Leuchtenburg says, "was pragmatic mainly in its skepticism about utopias and final solutions, its openness to experimentation, and its suspicion of the dogmas of the Establishment."

Yet New Dealers "inwardly recognized that what they were doing had a deeply moral significance," rooted as it was in "a broadly humanistic movement to make man's life on earth more tolerable, a movement that might someday even achieve a co-operative commonwealth."

Shortly before Obama's inauguration, a Spanish journalist, to illustrate Europe's exuberance over Obama, told me that her working-class parents were flying to Washington to join the inaugural celebrations. We agreed that the excitement over Obama was rooted in more than just the pleasure of not having George W. Bush around anymore. There is a sense of exhaustion and disillusionment in many of the democracies, and suddenly comes Obama with his promise of turning the U.S. into a beacon of reform and a source of political energy.

And so it was with FDR. Leuchtenburg cites a Montevideo newspaper declaring that under Roosevelt, the United States had become "as it was in the eighteenth century, the victorious emblem around which may rally the multitudes thirsting for social justice and human fraternity." Wouldn't it be lovely if that happened again?

Leuchtenburg's account of the past invites us to be part of our own era's rendezvous with destiny. He certainly enlisted me, and I'm grateful that he did. **TAP**

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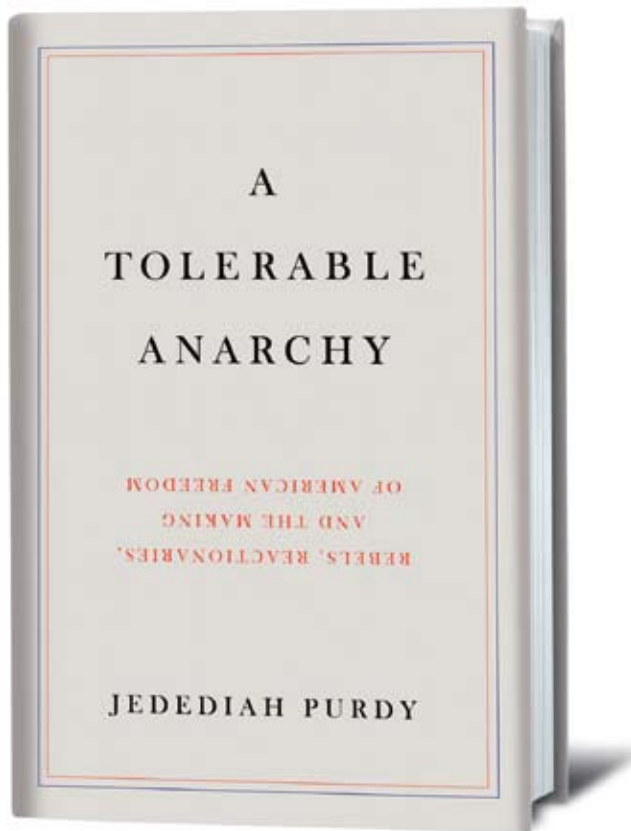
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